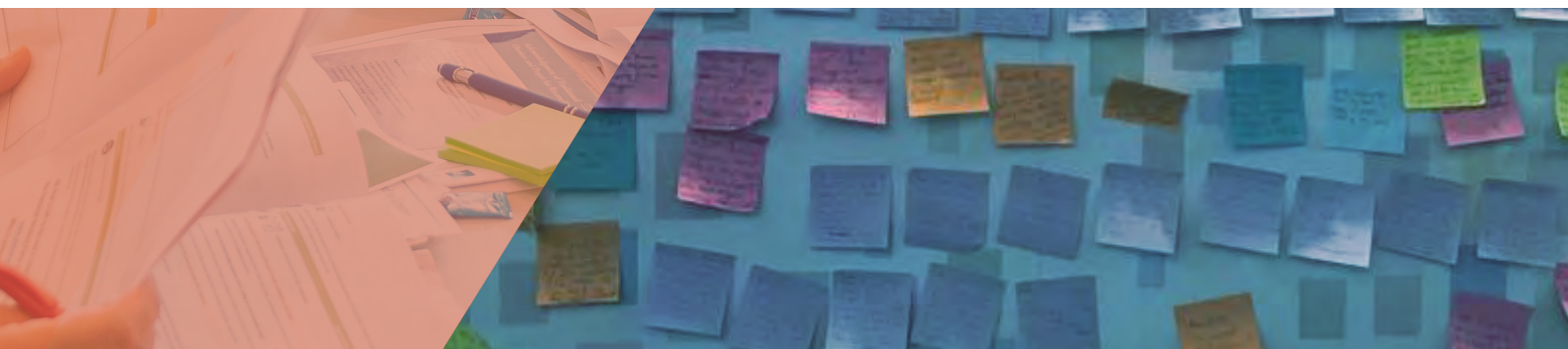




Plenary Council
Listen to what the Spirit is saying...

CONTINUING THE JOURNEY

Instrumentum Laboris (Working Document)
FOR THE FIFTH PLENARY COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA



We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia who have walked upon and cared for this land for thousands of years. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and future. We honour and acknowledge the continuing deep spiritual relationship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to this country and commit ourselves to the ongoing journey of reconciliation.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are respectfully advised that this publication may contain images, names and/or references to those that have passed.

We acknowledge the lifelong trauma of abuse victims, survivors and their families, the crimes of some clergy, religious and lay church workers, the failure of some leaders in the Catholic Church to protect, believe and respond justly to children and vulnerable adults, and the consequent breaches of community trust.

We commit ourselves to fostering a culture of safety and care for children and vulnerable adults.



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PREFACE

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties, of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts¹.

1. These opening words from the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) capture well the reality behind the many submissions, from individuals and from groups, which resulted from the Listening and Dialogue phase of the Plenary Council. There were 17,457 submissions received, all in response to the guiding question of the Plenary Council: What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?
2. The framing of the Plenary Council by this question has placed discernment at the very heart of the Plenary Council journey. It has been a time of deep prayer, community engagement and even catharsis, as the people of Australia sought to understand and express their faith, their desires and the joys and challenges they experience in their life in the Church. As a community of faith, we are all engaged in the challenging task of trying to understand what it means to belong to the Catholic Church in Australia at this particular moment in our history and what God is asking of us as his Church now and into the future. We are, in other words, seeking to "listen to what the Spirit is saying".
3. This *Instrumentum Laboris* (working document) seeks to offer an account of what the People of God have expressed, especially—though not exclusively—in the Listening and Dialogue and Listening and Discernment phases of the Plenary Council journey. At the same time, this document also seeks to invite the whole Church, and in a special way the delegates to the Plenary Council, into a deeper discernment which can help us hear the voice of the Holy Spirit emerging from the multiplicity of voices to which we are attending—not just in the Listening and Dialogue and Listening and Discernment stages of the Plenary Council journey, but also through a variety of

1 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (8 December 1965), n. 1.

other avenues. Among these are: the evidence given to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse; the formal recommendations made by the Royal Commission; the Governance Review, *Light from the Southern Cross* report; other contributions received from various groups in the Church, including the bishops; and the ongoing experience of dialogue, discernment and prayer which has continued throughout the whole Church in Australia.

4. A significant feature of the consultation process (subsequently referred to in this document as the “National Consultation”) has been the high level of engagement by the People of God. The 17,457 formal submissions represent the contributions of more than 222,000 people. These contributions do, indeed, express the “joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties”² of so many members of the Church. They are as individual and unique as the people who found the courage and commitment to put them forward. It can be presumed that these contributions give voice to people’s individual and communal experience of life in the Church. They also give voice to a variety of understandings of the nature of the Church and of hopes for the future of the Church. From all this, a complex picture of light and shadow emerges. Many expressions of gratitude for the ways in which people’s experience of the Church has enriched their lives were submitted. So, too, were expressions of disappointment, disillusionment and anger.
5. The statistics make clear that many Catholics, for a variety of reasons, did not engage directly with the Listening and Dialogue and Listening and Discernment process. This constitutes a significant “sign of the times” which needs careful interpretation in the light of the Gospel.³ While the Plenary Council must and will attend to the voices of those who did respond, the Council delegates will be conscious also of the many voices which have not been heard.
6. Not surprisingly, the formal submissions to the Council represent many different, and often conflicting, understandings of and hopes for the Church and its renewal. This, too, is a “sign of the times”.⁴ And it is precisely here that a significant challenge for the Church in Australia at this time emerges: how are we to ‘catch’ the voice of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the many voices to which we are all listening?
7. This is part of a greater challenge facing the Church in Australia today. We live in a multi-cultural, multi-ecclesial, multi-faith society which is marked, among other things, by a dramatic increase in the numbers of those who no longer profess any adherence to formalized religion. The Catholic community is called to respond to the hopes and concerns of our own people, so often expressed in many of the submissions received, and the often-muted cries of our wider society, by offering

2 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1.

3 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 4.

4 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1.

everyone the promise and the hope of the Good News of Jesus Christ, whom we proclaim to be the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6). Only by walking in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd can we be faithful to this mission.

8. As a community of faith, we know that our task is to “test the spirits to see whether they are of God” (1 John 4:1); that we are called to interpret the “signs of the times in the light of the Gospel”⁵; that the Lord calls us “not (to) be conformed to this world but (to) be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2). We believe that the Lord’s Church has been given “hierarchical and charismatic gifts”⁶ by God who thus equips us for the mission he entrusts to the Church.

9. Through the work of the Plenary Council we, the Catholic community in Australia, undertake this challenging task of discernment together. We do so with confidence. Our Catholic tradition is rich in its understanding and experience of discernment. We know that God speaks to us in a variety of ways. St Paul reminds us that we can know about God from the things which God has made (Rom 1:19-20) and the Letter to the Hebrews that “in many and varied ways God spoke of old to our ancestors by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son ...” (1:1-2). We know that Christ is the fullness of God’s self-revelation and that this revelation is found in written form in the Scriptures and pre-eminently in the Gospels.⁷ We know that the Church was founded by Christ and that our vocation is to be the sacrament of communion with God and of unity among all people.⁸ We know that Christ promised to give the gift of the Holy Spirit to his Church and that the Spirit would lead the Church into the fullness of the truth (John 16:13). We know that God’s Spirit is given to the whole Church, and that the People of God, together, have a deep instinct for the truth (the *sensus fidei*) which protects us, as a community of faith, from falling into fundamental error in matters of belief.⁹ We know that the bishops of the Church, in communion with the Bishop of Rome, have been given a particular responsibility for ensuring that the Church remains faithful to the truth of the Gospel, as this has been progressively understood and formally taught across the centuries.¹⁰ Above all, we know that Christ is our Way, our Truth and our Life (John 14:6). We are seeking to follow his way, commit to and live by his truth, and to allow the Spirit to work within us so that, with St Paul we can say: “I no longer live, for it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

5 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 4.

6 Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (21 November 1964), n. 4.

7 Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (18 November 1965), n. 4, 17-20.

8 Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 8, 1.

9 Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 12.

10 Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 25.

10. In the ongoing journey of discernment, the Church in Australia is being called to bring to bear all these gifts of the Spirit, given by God, as we seek to understand more deeply what God is asking of us in Australia at this time.
11. The Plenary Council, the formal assemblies of which are scheduled to take place from 3-10 October 2021 and from 4-9 July 2022, has been convened to enable the Church in Australia to do precisely this. This *Instrumentum Laboris* has been written, and is offered to the delegates, as well as the whole Church in Australia, as an aid in this vital task. It does not seek to be the final word, but it is intended to guide the delegates as they prepare for the formal assemblies. It offers a broad, but by no means exhaustive, perspective on the present-day situation of the Church in Australia. Clearly, the richness of what is contained in the many submissions to the Council and in the Thematic Discernment papers goes beyond what can be included in this document. In that sense, this document is best understood within that wider context.
12. By inviting the Catholic community, and in particular the delegates to the Plenary Council, to situate the many voices of the People of God within the larger context of the Scriptures, the Tradition of the Church and the pastoral reality of our current situation, this document seeks to provide an initial reference point for the work of the two formal assemblies of the Council. To assist the Plenary Council delegates, the document offers a number of questions and proposals for reflection and consideration, both prior to and during the Plenary Council assemblies.
13. The document is divided into four major sections, together with a preface and a concluding chapter. The preface sets out the purpose of the *Instrumentum Laboris* and the place it holds in the ongoing journey of discernment. The first chapter recounts a brief history of the journey so far and then seeks to set out the pastoral reality (the “signs of the times”¹¹) with which the Plenary Council will engage. The second chapter offers a theological understanding of the Church both as the subject and the object of the Plenary Council deliberations. The third chapter offers an initial analysis of some of the major themes which emerged from three of the Thematic Discernment papers: a Christ-centred Church which is humble, healing and merciful; a Church which is inclusive, participative and synodal; and a Church which is prayerful and Eucharistic. The fourth chapter turns to the other three Thematic Discernment papers: a Church which is missionary and evangelising; a Church which is open to conversion, renewal and reform; and a Church which is a joyful, hope-filled and servant community. It is recognized that these are, in some ways, arbitrary categories which flow into and out from each other. It is the hope of the writers that the reader will be able to make the necessary connections. The final chapter offers a meditation on the place of St Mary MacKillop in the life and mission of the Church in Australia, and on the role of Mary, the first disciple and the Mother of the Church.

11 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1.

14. Major topics discussed in this *Instrumentum Laboris* include: renewing a Christ-centred Church that heals wounds and warms hearts; strengthening practices of discernment and synodality; the call to co-responsibility in mission and governance; embedding a response to the Royal Commission; renewing and supporting the ordained ministry; promoting discipleship in parishes, families and young people; forming prayerful and eucharistic communities; engaging in society for the service of all; proclaiming the Gospel in a change of era; renewing the Church's solidarity with First Australians and those on the margins of society; promoting an integral ecology of life for all persons, societies and our common home, the earth.

In identifying and considering these various topics the skeleton of an agenda for the first formal assembly of the Plenary Council begins to emerge. Ongoing discernment of these topics, and others which have arisen in the course of the Plenary Council journey so far, will sharpen our awareness of the complexity of the current situation of the Church in Australia. This will enable us to recognise more clearly, and specify in a formal agenda, the particular areas which need to be explored in the first Assembly in October 2021.

15. When Mary was first greeted by the angel Gabriel and told of God's plan for her (Luke 1:26-38) she was, according to Luke's gospel, at first afraid. As Gabriel outlined God's plan for her Mary was confused: what she was hearing did not seem to fit in to her understanding of her future. It was only when Gabriel assured her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and the power of the Most High would overshadow her that Mary found it within herself to say "Behold I am the servant of the Lord. Let what you have said be done to me" (Luke 1:38). This response of Mary reveals her courage, her faith, her humility and her openness to God's will, no matter the cost. If we, the Catholic community in Australia, can emulate Mary's response then we can trust that the presence of the Word made flesh will be recognised more clearly by the communities and societies in which we live and which we seek to serve. We will be the sacrament of communion with God and of unity among all people that the Lord is calling us to be.¹²

12 Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1.

I. THE FIFTH PLENARY COUNCIL OF THE CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA: THE STORY SO FAR

*Come, Holy Spirit of Pentecost.
Come, Holy Spirit of the great South Land.*

*O God, bless and unite all your people in Australia
and guide us on the pilgrim way of the Plenary Council.*

16. In May 2016, the bishops of Australia formally announced their intention to convene a plenary council of the whole Church. That decision was ratified by Pope Francis on 19 March 2018. By convening a Plenary Council, the bishops were opting for a form of meeting with long-established history and clearly expressed purpose. Four earlier plenary councils had been held in Australia and Vatican Council II had encouraged the bishops to renew the practice of holding synods and councils.¹³ Essentially, a Plenary Council is to ensure that the pastoral needs of the people of God are provided for, by fostering the growth of faith, coordinating common pastoral action,

13 Vatican Council II, *Christus Dominus*, Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church (28 October 1965), n. 36.

and preserving, promoting and protecting of the good order and moral health of the Church community.¹⁴ These broad areas offer a helpful frame of reference for assessing the diverse issues and concerns that would soon begin to emerge.

THE CHURCH RESPONDS TO *NOVO MILLENNIO INEUNTE*

17. The announcement of this historic initiative had been long in the making. Already from the first years of the new millennium, the bishops had been discussing the need for a significant gathering of the Church in Australia. Early in the discussion, the idea of a plenary council was mooted but the suggestion did not initially win the support of the bishops. What did emerge, as the reflection matured, was the realisation that before any significant gathering of the Church could take place, there was a need for the whole Church to enter a time of prayer and discernment. Gradually this realisation led to the decision to invite the whole Church to enter into a Year of Grace. In effect, the bishops were inviting everyone to undertake a year-long spiritual retreat. And at the heart of that retreat would be the words of Pope John Paul II in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*:

The men and women of our own day—often perhaps unconsciously—ask believers not only to “speak” of Christ, but in a certain sense to “show” him to them. And is it not the Church’s task to reflect the light of Christ in every historical period, to make his face shine also before the generations of the new millennium?

Our witness, however, would be hopelessly inadequate if we ourselves had not first contemplated his face.¹⁵

18. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, written to guide the Church as it entered into the third millennium, provided an initial framework for the Year of Grace and for a subsequent project which would eventually evolve into a Plenary Council, albeit one with a uniquely Australian flavour. In his Apostolic Letter, the Pope offered a number of reflections and suggestions which provided guidance in the early planning stages. Of particular importance were the Pope’s reflections found in chapter three of *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, which carries the heading “Starting Afresh from Christ”:

“I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matt 28:20). This assurance, dear brothers and sisters, has accompanied the Church for two thousand years

14 Code of Canon Law, can. 445, in *Code of Canon Law: English Edition* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana); Congregation for Bishops, *Apostolorum Successores*, Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops, n. 25.

15 John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Apostolic Letter (2001), n. 16.

... From it we must gain new impetus in Christian living, making it the force which inspires our journey of faith. Conscious of the Risen Lord's presence among us, we ask ourselves today the same question put to Peter in Jerusalem immediately after his Pentecost speech: "What must we do?" (Acts 2:37).

We put the question with trusting optimism, but without underestimating the problems we face. We are certainly not seduced by the naive expectation that, faced with the great challenges of our time, we shall find some magic formula. No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: I am with you!

It is not therefore a matter of inventing a "new programme". The programme already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its centre in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is a programme which does not change with shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication ... But it must be translated into pastoral initiatives adapted to the circumstances of each community.

19. In speaking of the "great challenges of our time" and of the need to develop "pastoral initiatives adapted to the circumstances of each community", Pope John Paul II is inviting us to respond to "the joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted", and to scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel.¹⁶

LISTEN TO WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING

20. This call, which must be at the heart of any project of renewal in the Church, has been captured in the central question which has framed the preparations for the two formal Assemblies of the Plenary Council: What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?

To assist the whole Church in responding to this question, the bishops established a Facilitation Team and an Executive Committee whose work has been overseen by the Bishops Commission for the Plenary Council which had been established earlier.

¹⁶ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1.

21. As a concrete expression of the “synodality”¹⁷ to which Pope Francis is calling the Church, it was quickly decided that a formal consultation of the whole Church in Australia should be undertaken. A structured process of listening and dialogue, based largely—though not exclusively—on the principles of Ignatian discernment, was developed and offered to the whole Church as the means through which this consultation should take place.
22. The results of the wide-ranging response to the Listening and Dialogue process, made available through the Plenary Council website, were entrusted to the Bishops Conference’s National Centre for Pastoral Research. All the responses were received, read and collated. This work was eventually presented to the Facilitation Team, the Executive Committee and the Bishops Commission. Together, over three days, these groups met together, prayed together and privately, listened to each other, and worked collaboratively to decide on six thematic areas under which all the submissions could be gathered.

SIX THEMATIC AREAS FOR DISCERNMENT

23. The Facilitation Team then oversaw a process of selection for chairs and members of six writing groups, each of which would be entrusted with the preparation of a discernment paper based on one of the thematic areas. Those six papers were published at Pentecost in 2019 and have formed the basis of the ongoing discernment of the whole Church as the formal assemblies of the Plenary Council draw closer. Each of the six themes has sought to describe an aspect of the reality of the Church as it has emerged from the consultation process:
 - i. *Missionary and Evangelising:* Although the credibility of the Catholic Church in Australia has been challenged in the minds of many both within and beyond the Church, the love of God calls all Catholics to renew our commitment to share God’s mission in our time and place, reaching out to all people, including to those of other faiths and other Christian denominations, to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to the young and to families, and to “our common home”, the earth.
 - ii. *Inclusive, Participatory and Synodal:* Despite some Catholics’ experience of alienation and hurt through the Church, there is a deep desire for Church communities and agencies to imitate the inclusive and invitational presence of Jesus in our society, with particular concern for the poor and vulnerable, for the young and for family life, for the diverse ranges of rites

17 Francis, “Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops”, (speech, Paul VI Audience Hall, Vatican City, 17 October 2015), para 5. All subsequent references to ‘synodality’ in this document refer to this sense of the word expressed in Pope Francis’ speech.

and spirituality within the Catholic family, and for the particular gifts and challenges of women and men in society.

- iii. *Prayerful and Eucharistic:* Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), Catholics in Australia learn to recognise the presence of Christ in their experiences of loss and disillusionment and their experiences of conviction and joy as they journey through life. Like those same disciples, they also encounter Christ in the “breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:35) as they celebrate the Eucharist together. The diverse practices of prayer and the ecclesial/liturgical families of the Catholic communion (the Eastern Catholic Churches and the Latin Church) can all help to build up strong communities of faith, to enable the active and effective participation of all the baptised, to create opportunities for ongoing formation in faith and to draw all believers deeper into the mission of the gospel.
- iv. *Humble, Healing and Merciful:* Modelled on the humble, healing and merciful ministry of Jesus, Church communities in Australia are challenged to ‘touch the wounds’ of those who suffer abuse, of First Nations peoples dispossessed of land and culture, of the unborn, disabled or frail elderly, of refugees, the trafficked and newcomers, of those with mental illness, and of those who are marginalised. Catholics are called to stay close to the places of pain and trauma in Church and society, to work for a “revolution of tenderness”¹⁸ that moves beyond defensiveness and self-preservation to offer healing and new life.
- v. *A Joyful, Hope-Filled and Servant Community:* The Church is called to be at the service of all. The challenge is to strengthen local parishes and schools in the service of Church members, including Catholics who are estranged from the Church, and to engage positively and pastorally with the wider community. There is much to celebrate in the care and support that Catholic parishes, agencies and service organisations contribute to Australian society. Equally there is work to be done to rebuild trust, to embed servant leadership in Catholic communities and to align the mission and resources at diocesan and national levels.
- vi. *Open to Conversion, Renewal and Reform:* There are both internal and external calls for institutional reform in the Catholic Church. However effective reform requires a renewal of culture, which flows from ongoing conversion to the person and mission of Jesus Christ. Concrete action is required to address improvements in governance and leadership, recognition and formation for a wider range of ministries to strengthen local missionary presence, and to implement national priorities for the inclusion of First Nations people, the promotion of an integral ecology of life and the fuller participation of women in the mission of the Church.

18 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 88.

Listening and Discernment

24. Throughout the long process of consultation, it was important that every voice be heard and every voice treated with respect. No groups, Church agencies or individuals have been privileged over others, as “God shows no partiality” (Rom 2:11). Nor does the Catholic tradition invite us to believe that special groups exist within the Church who have access to knowledge which is not available to others. This is the heresy of Gnosticism against which Pope Francis warns in *Gaudete et Exsultate*.¹⁹ Nonetheless we recognise that the bishops as successors of the apostles and when teaching in communion with each other and with the successor of Peter, have a particular role in safeguarding and articulating Catholic faith and morals, and in governing the Church. A Plenary Council is a gathering of the particular churches within Australia, called by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, for the purpose of strengthening the pastoral mission of the Church. It is now the task and privilege of all the Plenary Council delegates to open themselves to the Holy Spirit as together they seek to hear the Spirit’s voice sounding through every dimension of the Plenary Council journey.
25. None of the work of preparation for the Council Assemblies has been done in a vacuum. The daily life and mission of the Church has gone on and this, too, is an essential part of the “signs of the times”²⁰ to which the Plenary Council seeks to respond. The decision to postpone the first assembly of the Council, made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, indicates the impact which the pandemic continues to have in the lives of all Australians. The pandemic, surely, is one of the “griefs and anxieties”²¹ to which the Church must respond. So, too, is the ongoing need for the Church to respond to the crisis of sexual abuse of the young and the vulnerable.
26. These, and many other pressing matters, represent the complex reality which the Church in Australia faces as we seek to discern what God is asking of us. Many of these challenges, and the opportunities they contain, will emerge in the pages of this *Instrumentum Laboris*.
27. From the very beginning, the Plenary Council has been an exercise in the practice of synodality. Pope Francis has reminded us that synodality involves:

... a Church which listens, which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each

¹⁹ Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Apostolic Exhortation (2018), n. 2.

²⁰ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1.

²¹ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1.

other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of Truth’ (John 14:17) in order to know what he ‘says to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7).²²

The *Instrumentum Laboris* represents a further step in the listening for which Pope Francis calls. It invites all Catholics, and in a particular way, the delegates, to enter now into a deeper “scrutinizing” of the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel and in the light of the faith of the Church. Without this, we will not be able to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit who continues to lead the Church into the fullness of the truth.

PASTORAL REALITY

28. Australia is blessed with great natural beauty, an abundance of resources, democracy, peace and prosperity. Our country values freedom, equality, a ‘fair go’ and ‘mateship’ and our society can be best described as pluralistic, embracing people of different religious beliefs and worldviews. The Constitution favours no single religious tradition²³, and while the rights of freedom of thought, conscience and belief are widely recognised, there are few legislative protections for the right to religious belief and practice, and the public promotion of religious teachings is increasingly constrained in formal and informal ways.
29. The Catholic Church in Australia has many strengths. In many respects our community still lives on the spiritual and cultural capital of generations of Christians past. Our network of parish communities and churches, schools and hospitals, aged care, welfare and pastoral care services is second to none. Faith and church membership are still prominent influences in many people's lives.
30. Nonetheless, the religious landscape has changed a great deal over the last fifty years. Christianity is still the main religion and, among those who identify with a religion, Catholics are still the largest religious grouping at just under a quarter of the Australian population (22.6%).²⁴ Yet an increasing secularisation, adopting a post-Christendom worldview and characterised by a multitude of spiritual options, including unbelief,²⁵ is increasingly common. This is primarily seen

22 Francis, “Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops”.

23 Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act, The Australian Constitution, (1900) Section 116, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2013Q00005>.

24 Australian Bureau of Statistics, “2016 Census data reveals ‘no religion’ is rising fast”, Australian Bureau of Statistics accessed 13, October 2020, <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mediareleasesbyReleaseDate/7E65A144540551D7CA258148000E2B85>.

25 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

in the rise in people reporting ‘no religion’—many of whom are young adults—who now make up nearly a third (30%) of the population.

31. In recent decades, life has changed significantly. Australians have embraced technological and cultural change while maintaining some core values and beliefs. Church and society have been enriched by waves of migrants who live peaceably alongside the First Australians and those who have settled here over the past two centuries. Ours is an affluent, high aspiration, low tension society. Yet population shifts from rural to urban areas challenge cities to meet growing demands for basic housing and infrastructure, employment, education and healthcare needs. Rural areas face shrinking communities, social and economic stresses and new challenges from a burgeoning, transient workforce. Insecure employment, pressures on relationships, shifting family patterns and advancements in science and technology impact our daily life that is segmented and busy. Mental illness, sickness, loneliness and financial pressures afflict many Australians. Statistics reveals increasing rates of suicide, depression and anxiety, violent crime and disengagement from traditional forms of community.²⁶ Fear of the future, distrust of institutional authority and the impact of climate change are part of the social reality for many.
32. These changes are accompanied by dramatic shifts in the Catholic community and the practice of the faith. While rates differ from place to place, and are much higher amongst some rites and communities, only around 12% of Catholics nationwide regularly attend Mass.²⁷ Among these, there are differing levels of acceptance of key Catholic beliefs and Church teaching.²⁸ Secularisation, which can be manifested as lack of attendance at worship or adherence to Church teachings, has occurred even amongst the faithful and not just 'out there'. Vocations to priesthood, religious life and marriage have declined, and fewer Catholics receive the sacraments. For many families, sacraments are only cultural milestones, rather than a key element in the faith journey leading to discipleship and active participation in the Catholic community.

26 Australian Bureau of Statistics, “National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results”, Australian Bureau of Statistics, accessed 13 October 2020, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/mental-health/national-survey-mental-health- and-wellbeing-summary-results/latest-release>.

27 National Centre for Pastoral Research, “Pastoral Research Online, Issue 44, April 2019”, National Centre for Pastoral Research assessed 13 October 2020, <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Pastoral-Research-Online-Edition-44- April-2019.pdf>.

28 Robert Dixon, “What do Mass attenders believe? Contemporary cultural change and the acceptance of key Catholic belief and moral teachings by Australian Mass attenders”, *The Australasian Catholic Record*, 90, no. 4, (2013): 439-458.

Trauma, Healing and Regaining Trust

33. One important factor in changing patterns of belief and practice has probably been the trauma within the Catholic community due to the appalling revelations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Apart from the severe damage caused to victims and survivors, and the vicarious trauma of families and friends, entire parish communities were left to grapple with the reality of this evil in their midst. Leaders and clergy continue to deal with the hurt and pain. Confidence in Church authorities and in their ability to care for their members has been damaged.²⁹ While very significant reforms have occurred in the areas of child safeguarding, professional standards and redress, rebuilding community trust will take many years.
34. The revelations about child sexual abuse within the Church coincided with a loss of trust in many other institutions and sectors of the community. Partly related to this, but also to a number of other factors, is an increased demand for transparency, open communication, consultation and accountability at all levels with the Church and other parts of society. There is also a renewed desire for lay people to be co-responsible with clergy and for women to have greater roles of leadership.

Much has occurred by way of sharing episcopal authority with priests and of clerical authority with the laity in recent decades. Many national, provincial, diocesan and parish agencies, ministries, governing or advisory councils are now led by or largely consist of lay people. A signal of this change is the fact that the heads of some of the largest national Catholic organisations, including for education, social services and international aid, are all lay women. The Plenary Council may promote further progress in these areas.

Cultural Diversity

35. From its originally predominantly Irish foundations, the Church in Australia has become increasingly multicultural as Catholic parishes, dioceses, schools and organisations welcome an influx of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers from many continents, particularly Asia. There is a great richness in the gifts brought by Catholics from diverse cultural backgrounds, who often contribute a strong faith commitment and transmit the Gospel both publicly and privately.

29 Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, “Mass Attenders’ responses to the clergy sexual abuse crisis: A Report to the Truth Justice and Healing Council on questions included in the 2016 National Church Life Survey”, National Centre for Pastoral Research, accessed 13 October 2020, <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ACBC-Research-Report-on-the-2016-NCLS-TJHC.pdf>.

36. Along with the Latin Church, the Eastern Catholic Churches are an integral part of the Church in Australia. They are a powerful reminder that unity can be expressed and experienced in diversity. Differences in spirituality, liturgy, Church governance and ministry, including the possibility of a married clergy, invite the Church in Australia to embrace diversity as a gift from God.

A sign of this diversity is at least nine major Eastern Catholic Churches in Australia: the Armenian, Chaldean, Coptic, Maronite, Melkite, Romanian, Syriac, Syro-Malabar, and the Ukrainian; and a much smaller Russian Byzantine Church. They contribute a great richness to the spirituality of the Universal Church, possessing venerable liturgical, spiritual, theological, and cultural heritages of great variety and unique insights and perspectives.

37. This spiritual diversity within the one Holy Catholic Church, was expressed in the preamble of the Vatican II decree on the Catholic Churches of Eastern Rite, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*: “for in them [Eastern Churches], distinguished as they are for their venerable antiquity, there remains conspicuous the tradition that has been handed down from the Apostles through the Fathers and that forms part of the divinely revealed and undivided heritage of the universal Church”.³⁰

The sense of community, and the attendant feeling of belonging, within these Apostolic Churches is invariably highly developed and keeps them relatively strong and united from generation to generation. Their origin in relatively recent migration brings a great appreciation to their brothers and sisters in the Latin Catholic Church of Australia for their wonderful welcoming, assistance and guidance.

38. Clergy from many cultures make a positive contribution to missionary and pastoral activity, despite facing difficulties in adjusting to the local culture. The effectiveness of the engagement of parishioners and priests can sometimes be hampered by language or cultural differences. Nevertheless, our multicultural identity must be recognised and respected as we work to bridge divides that alienate or ignore particular cultures. Pope Francis’ call to “welcome, protect, promote and integrate”³¹ encourages us to improve our efforts to promote intercultural understanding and respect, and identify opportunities to unify and strengthen multicultural relations at all levels in the Church.
39. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the oldest continuous culture in the world and an integral part of Australia. Numbering over 130,000 in 2016, Indigenous Catholics are the youngest

30 Vatican Council II, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite (21 November 1964), Preamble.

31 Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 104th world day of migrants and refugees”, (speech, Vatican City, 14 January 2018).

and fastest growing demographic in the Church in Australia. Indigenous Australians have a unique connection to the land, the environment and humanity that non-Indigenous people find hard to grasp fully. Through their accounts of ‘The Dreaming’ and in their stories, art, language and culture, they respect “the rhythms inscribed in nature by the hand of the Creator” and “a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion”.³²

40. Indigenous Catholics possess a great diversity of languages and traditions—which is both a treasure and a pastoral challenge. While dioceses and religious orders have done much to share faith, education and pastoral services with Indigenous communities, much suffering has been inflicted by the misguided attempts of those who were ignorant of this cultural richness. A more informed engagement, built on the foundations of understanding, compassion and respect, and standing together in solidarity, are ways towards a new path of healing which is an urgent task, not least for the Church.

Contributions of the Church to Society

41. Amidst many challenges, the Church makes a unique contribution to Australian society through its ministries and services, particularly those in health, aged care, community services and education. The commitment and service of Catholic religious men and women within these sectors is to be commended. Catholic schools make a significant impact as they educate more than 750,000 students. As “places of evangelisation, formation and enculturation”³³, they allow students and teachers to explore and experience the Catholic faith tradition. Catholic education offices have developed new curricula and pedagogies in religious education that relate to the contemporary student population of our schools.³⁴ For many children, the first time they hear about God in a substantial way—or experience prayer and liturgy—is through attendance at a Catholic school.
42. Catholic hospitals and aged care facilities offer care and healing to more than two million people. Pastoral care teams minister to the spiritual needs of the sick and their families. The St Vincent de Paul Society and other Catholic social service agencies work with over a million Australians each year. Catholic Mission and Caritas, among others, promote outreach to communities internationally. The Church is also aware of the religious diversity of those who serve and who are served in the Church’s name. Many staff do not personally identify with the Church yet share a passion for and contribute greatly to their specific ministry.

32 Francis, *Laudato Si’*, Encyclical Letter (2015), n. 71, 76.

33 Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (1997), n. 11.

34 Francis, “Launch of the Global compact on Education” (speech, Vatican City, 12 September 2019).

Of course, most lay Catholics lead and serve in the world beyond the Church, in politics, industry, trades, university, journalism, the arts and sciences, or other areas of social, legal and cultural life. The Plenary Council may promote further engagement by lay Catholics in leadership and service throughout our community.

Parishes and Dioceses

43. Australian parishes are very diverse in terms of their location, size and population demographics. Some are in numerical decline, while others grow and become increasingly multicultural. Those that flourish exhibit great strengths such as a committed leadership from the parish priest, strong parish community, active parish groups, a welcoming attitude and attempts to be inclusive.³⁵ Some parishes in more isolated areas are invigorated by lay leaders and pastoral workers, who lead Sunday liturgy in absence of a priest. Catholic schools and other pastoral care services are an integral part of most parishes and for many children and their families, the school is their primary point of contact with the Catholic community.
44. Decline in the number of Mass attenders and of young people engaged in the parish community is particularly concerning. Rural parishes and dioceses are greatly challenged through diminishing numbers of clergy and lay leaders, dwindling Catholic populations and a lack of adequate resources to support the celebration of the Eucharist and other parish ministries. Some thrive through innovative leadership structures, strong community and ecumenical engagement and adaptability, planning and vision.³⁶
45. Many submissions expressed a strong appreciation of the importance of parish life and a desire for parishes to be vibrant, inclusive places of belonging and outward-looking communities. Newer ways of being parish are needed to support younger generations engaging online and through schools and universities. New models are needed.
46. Finances constrain many of our dioceses and parishes and threaten their sustainability regarding availability of ministry personnel, adequate administrative support and strategic planning for mission. New administrative and compliance duties make it necessary for bishops to employ more staff in chanceries. While wealthier dioceses already provide some financial support, there remains a variance in the resources available to various parts of the Church in Australia and it is recognised that all dioceses currently face financial strain.

35 Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *Building Stronger Parishes - Final Report May 2015*, (Melbourne: ACBC Pastoral Research Office, 2015).

36 Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *Building Stronger Parishes - Final Report May 2015*.

Decreases in church attendance have resulted in fewer donors to support income streams and the economic pressures of COVID-19 on families is likely to exacerbate this situation. A review of diocesan boundaries is suggested as a timely recommendation to address these challenges and pave the way for a more sustainable future. There may also be need for greater flexibility in understanding what a diocese is and what it requires.

Spirituality and Faith Formation

47. The multicultural nature of our Church community has generated a variety of liturgical and spiritual experiences for Catholics in Australia. New ecclesial movements and communities have helped many faithful to rediscover the beauty of the Christian vocation. Nevertheless, the onslaught of secularism, individualism, relativism, materialism, the rise of new technologies, the sexual abuse crisis and the influence of mass media have fashioned a popular culture that is often alien or inimical to Catholic beliefs, doctrines and practices. This impacts many Catholics, leading to a decline in acceptance of the Church's teaching and in their practice of the faith. The decline in the number of Catholics celebrating the Sacrament of Penance (Reconciliation) is one example of this. The suggestion for a wider availability of the Third Rite of Reconciliation, mentioned in many submissions to the Plenary Council, indicates a desire for a renewed sacramental life. At the same time, many submissions expressed concern that Church teachings and traditions are at risk of being undermined by calls for reform proposed by some and threats from the increasingly secular political and cultural life in Australia.
48. There is a crucial need, therefore, for vocational discernment and ongoing formation, particularly in key areas of Catholic belief, sacraments, the Church and Christian living. Numerous positive efforts exist to support Catholics' knowledge of scripture. However, many people desire more spiritual direction and formation in prayer so that they can live as Christ's disciples, experiencing the renewal of ongoing conversion. This is needed more in rural areas where people lack access to Mass and sacraments. Preaching is another area that many see as needing renewal to enhance openness to conversion and formation for Christian living.
49. Lack of formation can have detrimental effects for Catholic agencies who run the risk of operating like non-profit organisations rather than genuine agencies of mission. Formation for advisory bodies and Catholic boards is recognised as being crucial to ensure leaders' ability to support the ongoing formation of their employees to live the Catholic identity and mission proper to their institution.

The Life and Ministry of Clergy

50. The pastoral presence of clergy enriches the local community, and the ministry of priests is greatly appreciated by all Catholics. However, local clergy in many (but not all) parts of the country are fewer and are ageing. Increasing workloads and greater isolation are a growing trend, particularly in country dioceses and large archdioceses. In the aftermath of the sexual abuse scandal, respect for the ordained priesthood has diminished among many. Differences concerning priestly identity and theology sometimes lead to discord and suspicion among priests and unrealistic demands of accountability can leave many priests feeling disillusioned, compromising their effectiveness in mission.
51. Religious leaders and bishops are in a unique position of responsibility and are called to witness in service and exercise pastoral care for those under their supervision.³⁷ Relationships between bishops and priests can be strained when there is a lack of consultation and adequate support for ministry. Greater caution must be exercised to prevent the misuse of institutional power, while at the same time promoting harmonious relationships. Particularly in the handling of allegations of misconduct, while the safety of victims is paramount, greater sensitivity, impartial assessments, respect and integrity are necessary to ensure procedural fairness and just outcomes and protect against unfair dismissals based on questionable claims.

Laity and Church Governance

52. The emergence of lay pastoral ministries in parishes, schools, hospitals and welfare organisations has given new vitality to evangelisation, pastoral care and outreach.³⁸ This has led to an increase in collaborative approaches to ministry in the parish context. Many submissions recognised the need for appropriate formation and support to assist lay people in discerning and using their gifts wisely.
53. In some parts of the Church, there is unease about relations between clergy and laity, when people do not feel welcomed as partners in parish leadership, and when clergy are seen to be exercising power without accountability or transparency; a ‘culture of clericalism’ that promotes privilege and enables abuse of power is a significant concern. In other parts of the Church a very healthy relationship between clergy and laity recognises different but complementary charisms and

37 National Committee for Professional Standards, “Integrity in Ministry: A Document of Principles and Standards for Catholic Clergy & Religious in Australia”, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, accessed 13 October 2020, <https://www.catholic.org.au/documents/1344-integrity-in-ministry-2010-1/file>.

38 Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, “Faithful Stewards of God’s Grace: Lay Pastoral Ministers in the Church in Australia”, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, accessed, 27 February 2020, <http://www.apmn.org.au/assets/lay-pastoral-ministry-2018-faithful-stewards-of-god-s-grace.pdf>.

opportunities for co-responsibility. There is a desire for consultative and collaborative approaches to governance at all levels in the Church and Diocesan Pastoral Councils³⁹ and Parish Pastoral Councils⁴⁰ are two widely supported avenues through which the expertise of lay people could be better utilised.

The Contribution of Women

54. The contribution and role of women within the Church in Australia cannot be overestimated. Religious women make up nearly three-quarters of consecrated Religious⁴¹ and women make up more than three-quarters of all Church employees. Lay women lead and serve in families, parishes, schools, health and aged care institutions, lay associations and ecclesial movements, and many areas of service and works of the Church.
55. Despite this, the perceived underrepresentation of women in formal leadership and decision-making roles is a challenging issue for many in Australia. So too, for some, is the exclusion of women from ordained ministry, notwithstanding the Church's formal teaching on this matter. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis spoke of a need for greater discernment on "the possible role of women in decision-making".⁴² In recent years, many women have taken up senior management roles in dioceses and Catholic agencies, accomplishments which may not often be recognised by the wider community. A greater awareness and promotion of these is needed, along with an expansion of these roles within the current structures of the Church.

Engagement with Young People

56. Australian youth are challenged by secularisation, the proliferation of new ideologies, changes to work and employment conditions, and the opportunities and risks of emerging technologies and a digital culture.⁴³ Migrant youth face additional difficulties of language, integration and

39 *Code of Canon Law*, c.511.

40 *Code of Canon Law*, c.536.

41 Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, "2018 Survey of Religious Congregations in Australia: Final Report to Catholic Religious Australia", National Centre for Pastoral Research, (2019).

42 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 103-104.

43 Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, "2018 Synod of Bishops XV Ordinary General Assembly: Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment—Australian Report", National Centre for Pastoral Research, accessed 13 October 2020, <https://www.catholic.org.au/images/pdf/2018%20Synod%20of%20Bishops%20XV%20Ordinary%20General%20Assembly%20-%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>.

assimilation.⁴⁴ However, young people have a deep desire to work for justice and equality and many find themselves drawn to the mission of the Church through its social ministries. There are also positive stories of those who have had an experience of the faith through local and international Catholic youth events and festivals.

57. The retention and support of young people are of particular concern for the Church today. The breakdown in transmission of faith through generations has resulted in fewer youth attending Mass and participating actively in parishes. Some perceive the Church's doctrines as a barrier, and the Church as less than inclusive, and are less likely to want to be part of it themselves. They are more unengaged than opposed. Others respond enthusiastically to the 'countercultural' message of the Church, and demonstrate their zeal through participation in charity work, social justice activity, youth groups and festivals, and various formation opportunities.
58. Young Catholics have called for Church leaders and ministers to accompany and assist them to face the challenges of discipleship. They not only want to be accompanied by the Church, but also want to accompany the Church on its journey, hoping that their contributions can influence growth and change. There was a strong desire expressed in the submissions to connect with young people, especially through digital and social media, and find ways to invite them into greater participation in the Church.

Person, Sexuality, Marriage, Family and Life

59. Our society has become increasingly indifferent, sometimes even hostile, to Christian understandings of the preciousness of human life, of the nature of the human person including the body, and of sexuality, marriage and family. Even amongst some church-going Catholics, Church teaching in these areas struggles to find acceptance. New ways of communicating and modelling the Church's vision in the area of sexuality and married life are urgently needed, including rich resources such as 'The Gospel of Life and Love' and 'The Theology of the Body'.

The Church recognises that parents are the first and foremost educators of their children⁴⁵ and share responsibility with the Church in ensuring their children's participation in the life of

44 Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *2018 Synod of Bishops XV Ordinary General Assembly Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment—Australian Report*, p. 7.

45 Paul VI, *Gravissimum Educationis*, Declaration on Christian Education (1965), n. 3.

Christ. The number of children receiving baptism is declining⁴⁶ and many families who seek this sacrament are not closely connected with a parish community.

60. Marriage, in its legal and social aspects, is undergoing significant change in Australia. There are divergent views on the question of who can marry and on the fundamental meaning and purpose of marriage. A large proportion of those of marriageable age, including many Catholics, do not marry, instead choosing to live together in less formalised arrangements. Many who eventually marry do so after a long period of cohabitation. Couples often decide to have few, if any, children. Many marriages do not endure, sometimes leaving the children without the benefit of a stable family life.
61. Catholics are not immune from the powerful influence of changing societal attitudes, and many find themselves in situations which are not in harmony with the Church's understanding of marriage. Indeed, for some the Catholic understanding of marriage is seen as outdated and irrelevant. In such a scenario the Church's responsibility to provide pastoral care and guidance, and a renewed catechesis on marriage, is both urgent and clear.
62. Equally important is the need for a renewed catechesis in other areas of Church teaching, particularly in relation to matters such as contraception, abortion, reproductive technologies and euthanasia. Many Catholics grapple with, or find themselves in opposition to, Church teaching on these and other issues. This was evidenced in the concerns expressed in several submissions in relation to people who are divorced and remarried, those in same-sex relationships and those who struggle with a variety of gender-identity issues. A long-term plan is needed to evangelise the community and catechise the faithful on the sanctity of life, the nature of the human person, sexuality, marriage and family, and then to support people to live healthy sexual and marital lives. It is also necessary for the Church to be engaged in the public arena and contribute to public debate on issues relating to human sexuality and marriage.

COVID-19 and the Environment

63. The COVID-19 global pandemic has threatened lives and livelihoods worldwide and affected the way we live in a manner previously unforeseen. Australian parishes have had to cease face-to-face ministry for significant periods of time. In many areas, Catholics continue to participate in Mass remotely, via television or livestreaming, and there is minimal access to other sacraments.

46 National Centre for Pastoral Research, "Pastoral Research Online, Issue 45, June 2019", National Centre for Pastoral Research accessed 13 October 2020, <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Pastoral-Research-Online-Edition-45- June-2019.pdf>.

The long-term impact of such restrictions on the Catholic community is yet to be experienced. However, this event has significantly changed the way we live and interact with one other, especially through enforced restrictions on movement and gatherings, greater reliance on technology and the requirement to communicate online. This has paved the way for discovery of new pastoral needs and greater opportunities for mission and discipleship as we seek to accompany people through this time.

64. As drought, bushfires and extreme weather become more common in Australia, we realise that our baptismal calling must necessarily propel us towards God's mission of love for the whole of creation. The Church can become more open to "ecological conversion"⁴⁷ by understanding and respecting how systems of life and love are deeply interconnected. A humble and merciful approach to caring for our environment cannot be separated from the way we care for each other, and the outcome of both is healing and restoration for our land and our people.

Looking to the Future

65. As we reflect on our pastoral reality and discern the "signs of the times"⁴⁸, the task ahead of us seems enormous, as we face challenging issues and difficult questions. But these also present enormous opportunities, as we are invited to renew our commitment to spreading the joy of the Gospel. As Pope Francis reminds us in *Evangelii Gaudium*: "Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's world. Every form of authentic evangelization is always new".⁴⁹ Some of these challenges and opportunities are treated in greater detail in the following sections of this document. While being conscious of the work to be done, we also have much to be thankful for. There are many signs of hope in that members of the faithful persevere with the practice of the faith, secularisation, disaffection and COVID-19 notwithstanding, and are living their commitment to love of neighbour in myriad ways.
66. Christ's invitation into deeper communion with the Trinity calls us to forge new paths. Moving toward a "civilization of love"⁵⁰ with Christ as our abiding hope, the Church can inspire within our nation "greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world's problems".⁵¹ Emerging initiatives in the Catholic community are exploring more missionary approaches within the families, parishes,

47 John Paul II, "General Audience" (sermon, Vatican City, 17 January 2001), n. 4.

48 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1.

49 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 11.

50 John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Encyclical Letter (1987), n. 33.

51 Francis, *Laudato Si'*, n. 221.

schools, religious life and practice, effective proclamation, digital mission and lived witness to the Gospel. These explorations, together with our commitment to Australian society and public engagement, will hopefully lead us to deeper personal conversion, renewal and reform of our institutions and a renewed fervour to spread the Good News.

II. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

*Give us the grace to see your face in one another
and to recognise Jesus, our companion on the road.*

THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL

To Start Afresh from Christ

67. The National Consultation has expressed a call for renewal and reform in the Catholic Church in Australia. Reflecting on the complex changes affecting both Church and society, as discussed in the previous chapter, Catholics are aware that the Church's communities, ministries and operations cannot go forward with a 'business as usual' attitude. Catholics hear the challenge of the gospel to learn from and respond to these changing circumstances.
68. In the light of this challenge, many respondents in the consultation call the Church to turn again to Jesus Christ, our brother and Lord; we are called to be a Church centred ever more fully on Christ and his Gospel.⁵² In the Christian life, authentic reform and renewal flow from a new immersion in

52 John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 29-41.

the “living water” (John 7:38) who is Christ. At the heart of Christian faith is a personal and living relationship with the “Word [made] flesh” (John 1:14), present and active in all creation. This personal encounter with the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord, who meets us in the power of his Spirit and renews all things with the abundance of life (John 10:10), transforms the lives of both individual believers and of faith communities.

69. The Second Vatican Council highlighted the centrality of Jesus Christ in human existence and in all creation. In opening to us the mystery of the Father’s love, Christ reveals humanity to itself and makes clear our noble vocation.⁵³ In the beginning, God created humans in “the image and likeness of God” (Gen 1: 26), to live in personal relationship with others and with the Creator, as stewards and caretakers of God’s good creation (Gen 1: 31). In Christ, the New Adam and Image of the unseen God (Col 1:15), the promise of creation is fulfilled, and this graced human existence is offered to all. This Christian vision of humanity underpins the Church’s commitment to the inviolable dignity of human persons, the integrity of our material and spiritual nature, our relational and social character, and our destiny in the communion of all creation in the eternal life of the resurrection. From this vision flows the Church’s understanding of human solidarity and the common good, of the fruitful intimacy of conjugal love, and of the integrity and freedom of the created order.

From the Heart of the Gospel

70. A consistent theme in the National Consultation is the Gospel imperative of “love of God and love of neighbour” (Mark 12:29-31).⁵⁴ Love of God and neighbour is seen as the criterion of authenticity for all organisational plans, pastoral strategies and civic engagements the Church undertakes in this country.
71. In emphasising this theme, Australian Catholics echo Pope Francis’s challenge to rediscover “the heart of the Gospel”, the fundamental *kerygma* or message of the Christian faith which is “the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose” for all people.⁵⁵ This reality of “saving love”, is to be distinguished from what the Pope calls “secondary aspects” of Church teaching and practice that may be derived from but cannot take the place of the person-to-person encounter of divine love.⁵⁶ In speaking of God’s love today, Pope Francis urges, we must

53 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22.

54 Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *Listen to What the Spirit is Saying: Final Report for the Plenary Council Phase I: Listening and Dialogue* (Canberra, ACT: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2019), n. 28.

55 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 11, 34-36, 264-267.

56 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 34-36.

“concentrate on the essentials” in our communication with the world and not become “obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed”.⁵⁷

Renewal for the Sake of a Missionary Option

72. Renewal of the Church’s mission comes about through an encounter with the “newness of the Gospel”,⁵⁸ which is itself a meeting with the new Human One, Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6).⁵⁹ It is this ever-deeper conversion of our lives towards the person and mission of Jesus, as individuals and communities, that brings forth a renewal of the mission and institutional structures of the Church. “In its pilgrimage on earth Christ summons the Church to continual reformation, of which it is always in need,” and which leads to an “increase of fidelity to the Church’s own calling”.⁶⁰ The National Consultation draws attention to the need for renewal and reform in the Church in Australia at the level of culture as well as activities, seeking a “different way of being Church” in this country.⁶¹
73. Pope Francis has emphasised that what is needed in the current circumstances is more than a structural, organisational or functional change.⁶² He has regularly spoken of the temptation of a “new Pelagianism” which attempts to correct problems and reduce difficulties and tensions within the Church by relying on bureaucratic and administrative reforms. Alternatively, we can be tempted by a new “Gnosticism” which insists on doctrinal purity or ideological correctness in the effort to renew the life of the Church. In both these cases what is lacking is trust in the grace of God, “the irruption of the Holy Spirit” within hearts and structures, renewing the entire body of the Church.⁶³
74. Rather, Pope Francis, echoing the thoughts of his predecessors since the Second Vatican Council, insists that an authentically Gospel-inspired renewal of the Church flows from a renewed encounter with Jesus Christ and his Holy Spirit and gives rise to a ‘pastoral conversion’ of the entire Church, a renewal that is expressed in a ‘missionary option’ or ‘missionary impulse’ for making the saving love of God known in every place.

57 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 34-35, 164-166.

58 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 11.

59 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22.

60 Vatican Council II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Decree on Ecumenism, (21 November 1964), n. 6.

61 Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *Listen to What the Spirit is Saying: Final Report*, n. 80-99.

62 Francis, *Letter to the Pilgrim People of God in Germany*, letter, (2019).

63 See Francis, *Letter to the Pilgrim People of God in Germany* and Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 94.

75. Australian Catholics are aware that this challenge of renewal confronts the Church at a time when the organisational structures, ministry personnel, financial and management resources of dioceses, parishes and religious institutes are under significant pressure, even to the point where questions on sustainability are raised. The recent Instruction issued by the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy with the approval of Pope Francis, *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community*, recognises this situation and encourages the participation of the entire People of God gathered in local communities to hear the call "to go out of themselves in a spirit of communion and collaboration, of encounter and closeness, of mercy and solicitude for the proclamation of the Gospel".⁶⁴
76. There is, of course, no magic formula when it comes to renewing the structures and activities of dioceses, parishes and other faith communities. Our task is to translate the heart of the Gospel into lived expressions of Catholic faith embedded in each context, taking account of "time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication".⁶⁵ Writing to the Church in Oceania, Pope John Paul II recalled a parable of renewal told by Aboriginal Australians:

If you stay closely united you are like a tree standing in the middle of a bush-fire sweeping through timber: the leaves are scorched, the tough bark is scarred and burned, but inside the tree the sap still flows, and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree you have survived the flames, and you have still the power to be born. The time for rebirth is now.⁶⁶

To Bring Good News ... To All Creation

77. Jesus Christ, who is himself the Good News (*euangélion*) and the "greatest Evangeliser",⁶⁷ draws into his mission all those who respond in faith to his Gospel and its proclamation of the presence of the kingdom or reign of God within creation. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has drawn near. Repent and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1:15). This conversion of disciples' lives toward the person of Christ and the ways of his Gospel becomes a joyful witness that continues Jesus' proclamation of the Good News. "For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new".⁶⁸

64 Congregation for the Clergy, *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church*, Instruction (20 July 2020), n. 2.

65 John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 29.

66 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Oceania*, Apostolic Exhortation (2001), n. 28.

67 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation (1975), n. 7.

68 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 18-19.

78. Impelled by the Holy Spirit, Jesus manifested the kingdom of God in his ministry and teaching and in his formation of a community of disciples to share in his mission. At the centre of Jesus' mission and identity is the great commandment of love of God and love of neighbour (Mark 12:28-31), which Jesus learned from his people's scriptures and redefined in terms of his own person and ministry: "This is my commandment, that you should love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12).⁶⁹ Jesus summarised the teaching of the Gospel in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), with its wisdom of the blessed life of the kingdom and its call to imitate the perfect love of the Creator, which extends like the sunshine even to enemies and the wicked.
79. It is through the death and resurrection of Jesus, communicated to us in the gift of the Holy Spirit, that God's kingdom achieves its irrevocable purpose in history and in all creation (Mark 16:15). The Spirit of God, who breathed the cosmos into existence and raised the dead Jesus into a new and glorious existence, is active within all created things to bring them into the fullness of the kingdom.⁷⁰ "The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ, the measure of the maturity of all things".⁷¹

Christ—The Rock at the Centre

80. For the Anangu people of central Australia, the Creator's story is embodied in the land of Uluru, with its law, culture and relationships of belonging.⁷² The land and the rock speak to Christians also of Jesus, in whom God's story and promise for all that exists becomes visible. St Paul speaks of Christ, crucified and risen, as the Rock in the desert (1 Cor 10:5), recalling God's faithful accompaniment of his people on the journey from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the promised land. The life and ministry of Jesus, his suffering and death, rising to new life and sending of the Spirit, is the rock where Christians recognise God dwelling among his people (John 1:14; Rev 21:3).
81. Through his paschal mystery, Christ has become the "life-giving Spirit" (1 Cor 15:45) who shares eternal life with all things; Christ is the rock from whom springs the living water of the Holy Spirit (John 8:38), to heal, restore and gather all things into the communion of divine life, "so that God may be all in all" (1 Cor 15:43).

69 John Paul II, *Redemptor Missio*, Encyclical Letter (1990), n. 14-15.

70 John Paul II, *Redemptor Missio*, n. 28.

71 Francis, *Laudato Si'* n. 83.

72 Brooke Prentis, "Uluru Pilgrimage", Common Grace, accessed 24 October 2019, <https://www.commongrace.org.au/uluru-pilgrimage>.

THE CHURCH—MYSTERY AND GIFT

The Sacrament of Communion, Divine and Human

82. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus continues to call and form disciples to “be with him and to be sent out” in his mission (Mark 3:14). The Church is the community of those called out (*ekklesia*) from among humanity, recreated through sharing in the sufferings and the glory of Christ, and sent into the mission of God’s kingdom, as the sign and sacrament of “intimate union with God and of the unity of all humanity”.⁷³ This vocation to communion, the sharing of life and love among humans and with God, is a reflection of the Triune divine mystery, “the source and inspiration of all Christian relationships and every form of Christian community”.⁷⁴ The Church is both “gift and mystery” of divine-human communion.⁷⁵
83. As the sacrament of communion, the Church stands in relationship with all cultures and peoples, and with the entire universe. The Church signifies and builds up the shared life of God’s kingdom. This calls all members of the Church to continual conversion from self-serving egoism to self-giving love and a willingness to “bear each other’s burdens” (Gal 6:2). It is in the liturgy of the Church, especially the celebration of the Eucharist, that this communion is expressed and deepened.⁷⁶
84. An expression of this vocation to communion is the synodality which is “a constitutive element of the Church”.⁷⁷ A synodal Church expresses its communion through mutual listening and discernment. The local participation of all the baptised “from below to above” must interact with the universal discernment “from above to below” by which the bishops exercise their collegial oversight.⁷⁸ A synodal Church strives for ever fuller communion through “the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that is, walking together with the whole Church under his light, his guide and his irruption, to learn to listen and discern the ever-new horizon that [the Spirit] wants to give us”.⁷⁹

The Journey of Holiness—Life Shared with God and Others

85. Vatican II’s understanding of the Church as the sacrament of communion is grounded on the transformative reality of Christian baptism, through which Christ acts to share the grace of his

73 Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1, 48.

74 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Oceania*, n. 10; see also Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes*, *Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church* (1965), n. 2.

75 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Oceania*, n. 10.

76 Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (4 December 1963), n. 2.

77 Francis, “Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops”.

78 Francis, *Letter to the Pilgrim People of God in Germany*, n.3.

79 Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, n. 63-65.

dying and rising with each believer through the “love of God which has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us” (Rom 5:5). The grace of this renewing gift establishes believers in the communion of the Body of Christ, the Church, for “we were all given the same Spirit to drink” (1 Cor 12:13). Thus, by the gift of the Spirit and in the communion of our brothers and sisters in faith, we become holy “after the model of the Holy One who calls us” (1 Pet 1:15).

86. The journey of communion and holiness calls for a decisive commitment by each believer to live fully the implications of their baptism in all dimensions of their lives—personal relationships and family life, workplaces and community groups, leisure and entertainment activities, civic engagements—so that they might more effectively share in Christ’s priestly, prophetic and kingly office in the Church and in the world.⁸⁰ “Since baptism is a true entry into the holiness of God, it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity”.⁸¹
87. As disciples of Jesus and sharers in his mission for the sake of the kingdom of God, the Church is continually challenged to become more authentically the community of the beatitudes (Matt 5: 1-12). In the practice of these blessings of the kingdom, the Church witnesses to “the most authentically human and divine happiness. The beatitudes are the mirror in which we look at ourselves, which allow us to know if we are walking on the right path: it is a mirror that does not lie”.⁸²
88. The journey of holiness into ever fuller communion of life with God and others is impossible without growth in the practices of the spiritual life, of attentive awareness, inner stillness, active listening, reflective reading and discerning action. The ‘prayer of the heart’⁸³ enables the life of the beatitudes to grow interiorly and to shape our relationships with others. Many non-Aboriginal Catholics have been enriched spiritually by learning about the Indigenous understanding of *dadirri*:

Our Aboriginal culture has taught us to be still and to wait. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course—like the seasons. We wait for the rain to fill our rivers and water the thirsty earth... We wait on God, too. His time is the right time. We wait for him to make his Word clear to us.

80 Vatican Council II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (18 November 1965), n. 2.

81 John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 31.

82 Francis, *Letter to the Pilgrim People of God in Germany*, n. 12.

83 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, English translation, 2nd ed. (1997), n. 2558-2565.

We don't worry. We know that in time and in the spirit of *dadirri* (that deep listening and quiet stillness) his way will be clear.⁸⁴

A Sign of Unity in Diversity

89. As we have seen, the diversity within the Catholic Church reflects that of the wider Australian community, in one of the most multicultural and pluralistic societies of our region. The Church's vocation to communion and the holiness of a shared life calls us to better recognise the presence of the Eastern Catholic Churches, the Latin Church, religious orders, spiritual charisms, devotional expressions and ecclesial movements within the communion of the Church in Australia. As the sacrament of communion, it belongs to the Church's identity and mission to hold together the entire world (*catholicus*) of cultures, expressions and customs within the bonds of faith, hope and love. In this way the Church becomes the effective sign and sacrament of God's intention for the universal communion of all creation in the divine life.
90. Pope Francis has warned against the wish to remove the tensions and inconveniences that a recognition of diversity and differences can produce in the faith community. Instead, Church communities are challenged to "always widen our gaze to recognise a greater good that will bring benefits to all of us".⁸⁵ The Holy Spirit, who stirs up diverse expressions and responses of faith, "can bring forth something good from all things and turn it into an attractive means of evangelisation".⁸⁶ "The unity of the Church is not uniformity, but an organic blending of legitimate diversities".⁸⁷

A CHURCH THAT GOES FORTH

Examination of Conscience and Request for Forgiveness

91. A signal feature of the pontificate of Pope Francis is his consistent call for an outward-looking and pastorally engaged Church, a "Church that goes forth".⁸⁸

We cannot keep ourselves shut up in parishes, in our communities, in our parish or diocesan institutions, when so many people are waiting for the

84 Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, "Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness", Miriam-Roes Foundation, accessed 13 October 2020, <https://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/about-dadirri>.

85 Francis, *Letter to the Pilgrim People of God in Germany*, n. 11.

86 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 131.

87 John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 46.

88 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 20-24; see also Sandro Magister, "The Last Words of Bergoglio Before the Conclave", Chiesa Espressonline, last modified 9 March 2013, <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1350484bdc4.html?eng=y>.

gospel! It is not enough simply to open the door in welcome because they come, but we must go out through that door to seek and meet the people!⁸⁹

92. This centrifugal dynamic of the Church is not at odds with the centripetal dynamic of communion. All the baptised, with their particular gifts and energies for the Gospel mission, are “drawn to the centre which is Christ and then channelled into an evangelising impulse”.⁹⁰
93. At the turn of the millennium, Pope John Paul II spoke prophetically of the Church’s need for an “examination of conscience”⁹¹ and for acts of repentance in the light of historical failures by Church members to live according to way of the Gospel. The starting point for a renewed mission must be a communal “purification of memory” and a request for forgiveness from those injured or alienated by the words, attitudes and actions of Church members.⁹² As the Second Vatican Council put it: “the Church is not blind to the large gap which exists between the message which it delivers and the human frailty of those who are entrusted with the Gospel”.⁹³
94. Following the example of Pope John Paul II, the Australian Catholic Bishops recognised that the Church had in some ways “failed in its fidelity to Jesus Christ and to his call”.⁹⁴ Where members of the Church had acted in ways contrary to the Gospel, the bishops expressed their “sorrow and a commitment to avoid such failures in the future”.⁹⁵ While these faults concern the conscience of all Catholics in Australia, it is the bishops, “who by charism and ministry express the communion of the People of God,” who can most effectively represent the whole Church in public acts that “make confessions for the wrongs and request forgiveness”.⁹⁶

Reading the Signs of the Times and Pastoral Discernment

95. The Church ‘goes forth’ in society by building those relationships with people of goodwill that are called for and motivated by the Lord Jesus and his Spirit present in our midst. The Second Vatican Council described the Church’s missional method thus: “The Church has the duty in every age

89 Francis, “Homily in Cathedral of San Sebastian, Rio de Janeiro”, (sermon, San Sebastian, 27 July 2013).

90 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 130.

91 John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n.6.

92 John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 6.

93 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 43.

94 Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, “The Coming of the Third Millennium”, accessed 4 November 2020, <https://www.catholic.org.au/acbc-media/media-centre/media-releases-new/707-the-coming-of-the-third-millennium-1/file>.

95 Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, “The Coming of the Third Millennium”.

96 International Theological Commission, *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past* (2000), n. 43.

of examining the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel”.⁹⁷ This is a work of faith in the presence of the Lord and the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the world. “God’s people work to discern the true signs of God’s presence and purpose in the events, needs and desires which it shares with the rest of today’s humanity,” affirming those aspirations that move towards God’s kingdom, and challenging those attitudes and behaviours that may be inimical to it.⁹⁸

96. To be effective in this task, all members of the Church must contribute their particular charisms and roles: lay Catholics as individuals or communities, the bishops and clergy in their leadership roles, theologians and other specialists in their fields of enquiry.⁹⁹ Making use of the synodal and collegial processes at the local and international levels, the entire body of the Church is challenged to be attentive to the signs of humanity’s quest for life, meaning, freedom and responsibility, and to recognise in these events the paschal sign of Jesus’ death and rising to new life (Matt 16.4). Since the Second Vatican Council, Church teaching has often read the signs of the times by employing the See-Judge-Act method associated with the lay apostolate of Cardinal Joseph Cardijn.¹⁰⁰
97. Like his predecessors, Pope Francis has warned that the Church’s missionary engagement with society must be carefully distinguished from the temptations of either utopian or restorationist ideologies, which reduce the Gospel vision to entirely immanent goals. The practice of Christian discernment, whether by an individual believer or in communal settings, holds us open to the ever-greater call of the gospel and to the ever-new insights which emerge from reflection on our context, as we learn to attend to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Discernment is an essential spiritual practice for the entire Church in its mission to “live the Gospel in changing times”.¹⁰¹

To “The Least of These” (Matt 25:40)—The Inclusion of the Poor in Church and Society

98. While the missionary impulse leads Christians to encounters with every human person and every culture, we recognise a compelling sign of Christ’s presence in the lives and conditions of the poor and marginalised people of our society. In those who are considered “the least” (Matt 25:40)

97 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 4.

98 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 11.

99 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 44; International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles, Criteria* (2012), n. 52-53.

100 John XXIII, *Mater et Magister*, Encyclical (1961), n. 263; Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, Apostolic Letter (1971), n. 4.

101 Opening Prayer, “Mass of the Solemnity of Saint Mary of the Cross (Mackillop), 8 August”, accessed 13 October 2020, <https://www.marymackillopplace.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2020-Mass-Booklet-Solemnity-of-St-Mary-Mackillop.pdf>.

according to social attitudes and priorities, Christians are challenged to see the “blessed’ of God’s kingdom (Luke 6:20). And recognising this sign of God’s preferential concern for the weak, “the Church surrounds with love all who are afflicted... indeed in the poor and suffering it recognises the face of its poor and suffering Founder”.¹⁰²

99. In the National Consultation, Australian Catholics recognise gratefully the achievements of Catholic schools, parishes and agencies in their activities of solidarity and service with vulnerable and marginalised people. At the same time, there are calls for greater efforts by Church leaders and communities to contribute to a just, equitable and inclusive society, attentive to the needs of all people and of the environment we share.¹⁰³ As Pope Francis has put it: “We may not always be able to reflect adequately the beauty of the Gospel, but there is one sign which we should never lack: the option for those who are least, those whom society discards”.¹⁰⁴

The Church with an Australian Face

100. While the mission of the Gospel extends to every land and people, indeed to the whole cosmos, the Church is “made flesh” (John 1:14) in local communities and cultural contexts. “Each culture has a face of its own, and develops in a specific place, where geographical, historical and ethnic elements combine in an original and unique way”.¹⁰⁵ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples witness to the deep connectedness of personal identity, culture and land. From their many cultures and language groups, they recognise a spiritual belonging shared by all and open to all.
101. The National Consultation calls for deeper reflection on and stronger expression of the face of the local church in its diversity and its shared communion. Only in this way can the seed of the living gospel be effectively sown in the soil of Australian culture (Mark 4: 1-9).¹⁰⁶ In the chapters that follow, attention is drawn to the major themes raised in the National Consultation regarding both the internal renewal of Church life in all its communities and agencies in Australia (chapter 3) and the missionary renewal of the Church as it goes forth in this country to proclaim Christ and serve all people in his name (chapter 4).

102 Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 8.

103 Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium*, n. 108-119.

104 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 195. See also John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 49; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, (2005), n. 182-184.

105 John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace*, Message, (2001), n. 5.

106 See Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 20; John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 40; Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 68-69.

102. In the night skies of the southern hemisphere, “the Southern Cross stands as a luminous sign of God’s overarching grace and blessing”.¹⁰⁷ The Southern Cross shines on the face of the Church in Australia and illuminates the meaning and purpose of all creation. The Wardaman people of northern Australia name the smallest star *Ginan*; it is the keeper of songs of knowledge. With eyes of faith, Christians see all things through the knowledge of the cross and hear the song of God’s undying love as the origin and end of all that exists in the universe. With eyes opened by the light of the cross, Christians are drawn into the continuing mission of the crucified and risen Lord, who says: “When I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all people to myself” (John 12:32).

¹⁰⁷ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Oceania*, n. 13.

III. LOOKING WITHIN: RENEWAL FOR A CHRIST-CENTRED CHURCH

*Give us the courage to tell our stories
and to speak boldly of your truth.*

THE CHURCH AS 'WOUNDED HEALER'

103. The Catholic Church's long history offers a rich theology of the nature of the Church. In our present time this theology is given a particular profile in the pastoral vision of Pope Francis who explains that

...the thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after battle... Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. And you have to start from the ground up.¹⁰⁸

104. This desire for a pastoral conversion within the Church is echoed in many submissions from the People of God in Australia to the Plenary Council. These submissions invite the delegates of the Council to identify ways in which the Church in Australia can live out this mission anew, centred in

108 Spadaro Antonio "A big heart open to God: An interview with Pope Francis", America: The Jesuit Review, accessed 22 October 2020, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>.

Christ whom the gospels present as the great healer of the wounds of humanity. This, too, must be the Church's vocation in our day.

105. Each of the six Thematic Discernment topics identified in response to the submissions to the Plenary Council acknowledges this opportunity for new vitality and outreach within the Church. In this chapter, particular attention will be given to three of these themes: what it means to be a Christ-centred Church that is open to conversion, renewal and reform; a Church that is inclusive, participative and synodal; and a Church that is prayerful and Eucharistic.
106. It is particularly in relation to the desire for a Church that heals wounds and warms hearts, that we are confronted with the tragic history of sexual abuse of minors within the Church. The shame, disillusionment and anger of so many members of the Church was evident in the submissions to the Council. The damage inflicted on those who have suffered this abuse continues to impact on their physical, emotional, social and spiritual well-being. This suffering extends beyond the survivors to their families and friends, to the wider community of the Church, and to our society. Because of this, the healing of survivors—which needs to be our first priority— must be accompanied by our mutual care and support for each other.
107. The Church emerges as a “wounded healer”¹⁰⁹, both as the sacrament of Christ's presence and as an imperfect pilgrim people who are called to conversion. Acknowledging that the Church is composed of saints and sinners, we look to the Lord who alone can give us the grace of healing and reconciliation that so many seek today.

A DISCERNING CHURCH

108. A number of submissions to the Plenary Council focussed on issues that cause confusion or suffering for some people. This is particularly the case when people of faith and goodwill find themselves, or those they love, in conflict with the teachings of the Church, especially in relation to moral or lifestyle issues.
109. Some identify a conflict between what the Church proposes in its teachings or discipline and what they think their conscience or experience is telling them. Others see a seemingly unbridgeable gap between what the Church teaches and the concrete circumstances in which they find themselves. Others again perceive a lack of pastoral sensitivity in the way Church teachings are communicated or applied, either at the 'official' level or more locally.

109 Henri J. M. Nouwen; *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Images Books/Doubleday 1979).

110. In seeking to address such experiences and issues with both truth and love (Eph 4:15), Council delegates may need to distinguish which matters touch on the universal doctrine and discipline of the Church and are therefore beyond the competence of a Plenary Council or individual dioceses to determine. Some matters are a settled part of the Church's magisterium. Others would require a change of universal law or practice. Other matters again might be referred to the Holy See as recommendations, or for determination.
111. Other questions arise. Has the Church effectively communicated the meaning and value of its teachings and traditions? Have some Church teachings or discipline been applied in ways that unnecessarily alienate people or obscure the truth of these teachings? What steps can the Plenary Council propose to strengthen the quality and effectiveness of the Church's proclamation and faith formation for all people? While topics of doctrinal and moral teaching will emerge and are important, the primary focus of the Plenary Council is the effectiveness of the Church's pastoral response in its mission of proclaiming and living the Gospel in Australia today.

In the Light of the Royal Commission

112. Several contentious issues that emerged from the Thematic Discernment papers relate to the fundamental question of the exercise of authority, governance and leadership in the Church. The report of the Governance Review Project, *Light from the Southern Cross*, commissioned by the Australian bishops in response to a formal recommendation of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, touches directly on this question. It is also a prominent feature of submissions to the Plenary Council.
113. The Royal Commission pointed not only to individual failings within the Church but also to broader leadership and structural concerns within the Church that led to both the extent of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church and failures to respond adequately to this tragedy. Hence, the issue of the culture of the Catholic Church arises as a central concern for the Royal Commission and many submissions to the Plenary Council. This issue of the culture within the Church is recognised as important not only for matters of governance and authority but for every dimension of the Church's life, including the revitalisation of parishes, the better integration of members of the Church in a common life of faith and worship, and the increased engagement of all the baptised in Christ's Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:18-20). The Church's culture and the extent of its conformity to these Gospel imperatives will need to be examined.
114. As part of this reflection, it will be important to recognise that proposals for the renewal or reform of specific Church structures, including new ways and means of coordinating the Church's

missionary impetus, will be largely ineffective in initiating and sustaining renewal in the Church unless there is, more fundamentally, a reform and renewal of culture.

The Gift and Challenge of Synodality

115. In relation to the interconnected themes of authority, governance, leadership and decision-making, Pope Francis indicates that synodality is a way forward for the Church. This concept of ‘walking together’¹¹⁰ implies a common journey in which the faithful respond to God’s call and come to see their experiences in the light of faith, within the whole body of the Church and according to the Holy Spirit, so that new horizons for Christ’s mission become open and effective.
116. The Governance Review also identifies synodality as an essential component in promoting inclusion and co-responsibility in the Church’s exercise of governance. This includes a significant emphasis on the need for the Church to open more the gifts, charisms and contributions of women in leadership and decision-making at appropriate levels.
117. The Church in Australia is challenged to forge its identity as a communion that ‘walks together’¹¹¹ for the sake of mission. This requires a deeper understanding of synodality so that it can properly inform relationships, responsibilities and accountability at all levels of the Church’s life—in parishes, dioceses, the collegiality of bishops and the bishops’ communion with the Pope, all under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Renewing the Ministry of the Ordained

118. The Synodality for which Pope Francis calls will depend to a significant degree on the renewal of life and ministry of the ordained members of the Church. This features prominently in many of the submissions to the Plenary Council which make clear that while there is deep appreciation for the ministry of priests and other clergy in Australia who serve in our parishes and other communities, there is also concern about how well the clergy are supported and prepared for the challenges of the present time.

Such a renewal will depend to a large degree on an understanding of the role of the ordained ministry in the life of the Church. In its three-fold structure of bishop, presbyter (priest) and

¹¹⁰ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 33.

¹¹¹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 33.

deacon, the ordained ministry exists as a ministry of service. Those ordained to priesthood (bishops and priests), with the formally established ministry of deacons to assist them, are called to lead the whole People of God into a deeper fidelity to the baptismal vocation to be “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Peter 2:9).

119. Bishops have a fundamental role in this ministry of service, a role shared particularly, though not exclusively, with priests and deacons. It is summed up in the Church’s tradition as one of teaching, sanctifying and governing.¹¹² While it is the responsibility of the whole Church to maintain fidelity to the teaching of the Apostles and the unfolding appreciation of that faith across the centuries, it is through the communion of each local Church with its bishop, with the other local Churches scattered across the world, and with the Bishop of Rome, that the Church can fulfil its mission to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic.¹¹³
120. Within the local Church, the bishop relies in a particular way on the ministry of his priests and deacons. Both the priests and their bishop jointly bear the responsibility of fostering a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect and support as they seek to be ‘enablers’ of the priesthood of the whole Church.
121. In this light, the formation and leadership of clergy is identified as critical to the growth of dioceses and parishes and future efforts at evangelisation in the wider community. Some clergy can feel stretched by increasing administrative demands and be discouraged by a decline in participation and engagement in their parishes, which can also lead to fewer volunteers and resources.
122. The sexual abuse crisis has also impacted upon the morale of clergy. The Plenary Council could explore measures to better support deacons, priests and bishops in their ministry, improve clergy morale and offer vital support including pastoral supervision.
123. Submissions to the Council also raised what Pope Francis, among others, has identified as the danger of an unhealthy culture of clericalism within the priesthood and in the wider Church. At its most extreme, this has been identified as a significant factor in the sexual abuse crisis in the Church. It can also undermine the mission that belongs to the entire Church and discourage the exercise of gifts within it. Some fundamental questions arise in light of this concern: What are the causes of such a culture of clericalism? What are the theological, structural, psychological or spiritual influences that can contribute to it and how might the Church better equip its clergy and laity for mission today and for increasing co-responsibility in the decades to come?

112 Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 20.

113 See Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter Three, n.18-29.

124. All of this raises serious questions about the existing pastoral practice of parishes and the way in which the priesthood and episcopacy in particular are best lived in service of the mission of God. The sustainability of some parishes, and of the pastoral care provided by priests, can be an acute question for some country dioceses and is becoming more widespread in urban dioceses as well. In some rural and isolated parishes in Australia lay women and men lead Sunday liturgies in the absence of a priest. This reality might provoke discussion about how the Church in Australia best provides support for parishes such as these, including consideration of diocesan boundaries, inter-diocesan collaboration and other forms of mutual support, the sharing of resources and essential personnel for the sake of the faithful in these parts.
125. The Plenary Council might consider ways in which the formation, resourcing and support of clergy and religious can be enhanced at a national, diocesan and parish level. This is equally important for clergy working in specialised ministries, such as migrant communities and various ecclesial movements. The aim of these initiatives would be to ground all these ministries more deeply in the mystery of Christ, and to ensure that they are more widely promoted and practically supported by the whole Church.

The Call to Co-Responsibility in the Church

126. As a chosen race and a royal priesthood, the whole People of God is called to place itself at the service of the life of the world, just as Christ the priest offered himself for the life of the world. For the vast majority of Christians, this vocation will be lived out primarily in the context of their family life, their workplace and their engagement with their culture and society. In this way Christians respond to the Lord's call to be "the salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" (Matt 5:13-16).

For a growing number of Christians, this vocation will also be lived out through a more focussed engagement with the 'internal' life of the Church. The greater sharing of responsibility and the greater collaboration between the clergy and the whole community of the faithful, which reflects Vatican II's renewed teaching on the baptismal dignity of all, testify to this.

127. It is a fact today that lay women and men already hold significant positions of leadership in many Church ministries including education, health and social outreach, faith formation, diocesan administration and in other forms of service and oversight. It is open to the Plenary Council to explore ways in which this co-responsibility might be formalised and expanded, and the ways in which women in particular might be more fully involved in all aspects of the Church's life while upholding the Church's teachings on the nature of ordained ministry in the Catholic Church.

128. Areas of opportunity for such growing involvement include: the initial formation and selection of seminarians; the ongoing formation of deacons, priests and bishops; practical supports to enable the clergy to be faithful to their pastoral commitments; the need for a renewal of preaching and the growth of practical skills and leadership among clergy; specific support for clergy who come to Australia from other countries and cultures, and the support of parish communities to embrace both the possibilities and the challenges posed by the multicultural nature of our society, the Church itself and the clergy. These needs also apply to consecrated Religious who, according to their charisms, are called to play an active role in the mission of the Church as they have always done in the past.
129. Collaboration between the laity and the clergy in governance is already an established aspect of the Church's life in many areas. An evaluation of this in the life of the Church in Australia would be worthwhile. These structures include Parish Pastoral Councils and Finance Committees, Diocesan Councils of Priests and Colleges of Consultors, Diocesan Finance Councils, Diocesan Pastoral Councils, Diocesan and Provincial Synods, and other canonical and non-canonical bodies.

Parishes and Communities of Missionary Discipleship

130. Throughout the National Consultation, the need for the renewal of parishes and other Eucharistic communities was strongly affirmed. The discipleship of all those who form the parish has been identified as the key to the renewal of parish culture, its practices and its commitment to the work of evangelisation. The National Consultation also reveals widespread acceptance of the principle that leadership in the Church should always be at the service of the mission of Christ. The challenge is to ensure that this true of the Church in Australia.
131. There is not a well-developed understanding and practice of the Church as a community of missionary disciples. The Plenary Council offers the Church in Australia an opportunity to consider carefully, and prayerfully, what steps must be taken to awaken this awareness of the missionary vocation of every Catholic, for all the baptised are called equally to live and proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.
132. Every parish should be a school of holiness and evangelisation. These two dimensions provide a framework for urgently needed parish renewal. In relation to this need, the National Consultation provided a number of suggestions: restructure parishes within a diocese to make the best use of limited resources; assess the sustainability of current diocesan boundaries; strengthen formation of adult leaders; encourage the sharing of resources and fostering of collaboration between parishes, schools, agencies and movements; re-examine the effectiveness of sacramental preparation programmes; promote the spiritual life and an intentional, missionary discipleship

amongst the faithful; and engage new forms of technology as adopted during the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

133. Our parishes in particular are challenged to renew the formation of children, young people and families who may not be strongly connected to the Church but who still have an ‘instinct for the faith’ which prompts them to seek the sacraments or engage in part with of the Church’s life. The great challenge of accompaniment, as promoted by Pope Francis, is to encounter people where they are in order to, according to help them take some further steps along the journey of faith. In seeking to apply this general principle to catechesis and formation, there will be a need for a deeper understanding of evangelisation and effective outreach to those near and far, and for the advice and expertise of people well-formed in listening, spiritual discernment and supporting the growth of discipleship.
134. In the growth of local communities as “one body, one spirit in Christ” (Eph 4:4), the Plenary Council also offers the Church in Australia an opportunity to strengthen the bonds of communion, cooperation and solidarity between the various Churches in Australia who are in communion with Peter, including the Eastern Catholic Churches. Increasing collaboration between the Churches will strengthen Catholic culture and will be increasingly important if the mission of evangelisation is to reach the many cultures and communities which form the Church in Australia.

PRAYER AND THE EUCHARIST ARE FUNDAMENTAL TO RENEWAL

135. Underpinning such renewal of practices and methods within dioceses, parishes, migrant communities and movements must be the renewal of sacramental life and prayer among all Catholics for it is the encounter with Christ in the midst of the Church that rekindles hope and makes genuine renewal possible. This is seen in the Emmaus story in Luke’s Gospel (24:13-35) where, in the midst of the disciples’ difficulties and even disillusionment, the faith of the followers of Jesus is restored and a new future opened for them by this encounter.
136. It is recognised that discipleship must be intentional, and this implies that when the community of disciples gathers in worship, particularly in liturgical celebrations, all are “conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration”.¹¹⁴
137. There is some concern that a full understanding of, and reverence for, the Eucharist as the Real Presence of Christ—Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity—is in a state of decline in Australia. One of

¹¹⁴ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n 48.

the challenges for the Plenary Council might well be that of determining how we might better welcome God's people to the Eucharist and assist them to understand what this sacrament offers, entails and asks of those who receive it.

138. Recognising that fewer people today participate in the sacramental life of the Church than in previous times, the question of how best to provide formation on the sacraments arises. Such formation will need to focus on both deepening people's faith and increasing their knowledge. A dimension of this formation must be the ethical and missionary implications of the Eucharist for the Church's communion of faith will always be incomplete while the poor go hungry, for "we cannot properly receive the Bread of Life without sharing bread for life with those in want".¹¹⁵
139. Assisting the faithful in better developing a life of prayer outside the Mass, including personal prayer and the prayer of families and groups, has also been recognised as integral to holiness in everyday life and engagement with the Eucharist. Indeed, the Scriptures invite us to "Pray constantly" "...and always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father" (1 Thess 5:17; Eph 5:20). Catholic spiritual traditions and charisms, such as those offered by Religious congregations and ecclesial movements, offer much to the increasing desire for an authentic way of life, among young adults but also many others who are searching for meaning and fulfilment in uncertain times.
140. The Church offers us a variety of 'schools of prayer', liturgical traditions and practices through which people can be drawn into an ever-deepening encounter and lifelong conversion to Christ. This includes spiritual reading, the Divine Office, the rosary, *lectio divina*, the practice of grace at meals, and Eucharistic Adoration, which is growing in popularity, especially among younger Catholics.
141. Some of these remain widely practiced in Catholic parishes and communities in Australia, including many migrant communities and chaplaincies, while others have declined, becoming reserved to small groups. Spiritual direction is not readily available to many Catholics while, more positively, there remains an enduring hunger to read and study Scripture, particularly the gospels. The Plenary Council might consider ways in which the spiritual lives of Catholics can be further nurtured through the discovery or re-discovery of these resources within our Catholic spiritual tradition.
142. As we look to the future, we recognise the important role that our bishops, dioceses, parishes, Religious congregations, retreat centres, theological institutes, and communities of the lay faithful

¹¹⁵ Pedro Arrupe, "Address prior to Eucharistic Congress 1976", The Portal to Jesuit Studies, accessed 13 October 2020, https://jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/1976_arrupeeucharist/.

can play in this renewal of formation in prayer and holiness. Recognising the ‘signs of the times’, the development of theologically sound resources, including digital forms of accompaniment such as podcasts and other online media, can support the People of God in learning to pray within the tradition of the Church and in their daily lives.

143. Additionally, a national portal or online resource of various forms of prayer, charisms, opportunities for retreats and spiritual direction, and specific input for different groups such as families, educators, seniors, and young people could assist in this effort. Much has already been done in this area but the possibilities for the future remain promising.

The Discipleship of Young People and Families

144. Especially apparent in the submissions to the Council was the need for renewed attention to the place and promise of young people in the Church, and for a greater focus on the family. Following the 2018 Youth Synod, Pope Francis drew attention to the Church’s need to listen to, and be challenged by, the voices of young people:

A Church always on the defensive, which loses her humility and stops listening to others, which leaves no room for questions, loses her youth and turns into a museum. How, then, will she be able to respond to the dreams of young people? Even if she possesses the truth of the Gospel, this does not mean that she has completely understood it; rather, she is called to keep growing in her grasp of that inexhaustible treasure.¹¹⁶

145. This treasure must be offered and more deeply grasped by walking together with young people, making use of every pastoral approach that has “borne good fruit and effectively communicates the joy of the Gospel”.¹¹⁷ Of particular concern for young people, identified by the young themselves, is the issue of mental health, including the disturbing prevalence of suicide and suicide attempts.
146. Identifying and forming those who are suited to ministry with young people must be a priority. Catholic schools and higher education institutions make an important contribution to the formation of and ministry to young people. This includes universities where the dialogue between faith and reason can take place. However, given the changing landscape in Catholic schooling—and acknowledging varying levels of faith and formation of staff and students within many schools and related agencies—the identity, mission and evangelising capacity of Catholic education in Australia

¹¹⁶ Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Apostolic Exhortation, (2019), n. 41.

¹¹⁷ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, n. 205.

should be examined with candour and courage if they are to bring people closer to Christ and his plan for their lives.

147. The National Consultation and recent Church documents also highlight the need for "remote" formation of young people in the Christian understanding of and aspiration to marriage, more "proximate" marriage formation for engaged couples and support for the newly married and young families in their efforts to pass on the faith amidst many competing voices and social influences.¹¹⁸
148. For Catholics, formation for married life and parenting, arising from their baptismal vocation, requires an intentional and ongoing ministry of peer support, spiritual and sacramental accompaniment, and discerning reflection on and support for the challenges of each phase of married and family life. This vision of initial and ongoing formation for Christian marriage and parenting has been described by Pope Francis as a "catechumenal" journey that could be considered by the Council delegates.¹¹⁹
149. At the heart of these opportunities for renewal is a deeper appreciation for an anthropology centred on Christ who reveals to each and every one, in each and every circumstance, what it means to be a human person in relationship to God, others and the world. This invites the Church to explore ways to make this account of Jesus Christ living and present in worship, preaching, pastoral accompaniment, faith formation and other practices of ecclesial life.
150. Christ is presenting the Church in Australia with the challenge to both welcome and proclaim, to boldly preach and accompany every person, especially those who feel marginalised or are in need in our faith communities, such as single-parent families and families with disabilities, those who suffer mental illness or have other needs for support and all those who feel rejected or excluded.

118 John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, Apostolic Exhortation, (1981), n. 66.

119 Francis, "Address to the Officials of Tribunal of the Roman Rota for the Inauguration of the Judicial Year" (speech, Clementine Hall, Vatican City, 25 January 2020).

JOURNEYING TOGETHER IN DISCERNMENT

The Church as ‘Wounded Healer’

- How might the Church in Australia better support and form the clergy for leadership and service in the twenty-first century?
- How can we strengthen the culture of listening, learning and pastoral care in Catholic communities and agencies?

A Discerning Church

- How might the preparations, experience and journey of this Plenary Council shape the way in which the Church in Australia discerns its priorities and practices into the future?
- How can we become less ‘self-referential’ and more responsive to the call of the Gospel in the signs of the times of the Australian context?
- In what way does the Church in Australia recommit to the mission of Catholic education, including Catholic schools and universities in the decades to come?
- How can we support young people and others whose faith is challenged by cultural norms?
- Do diocesan and parish structures match the pastoral needs of contemporary Australia and how might they be renewed to serve the mission of evangelisation?

Prayer and the Eucharist are fundamental to renewal

- How can the dioceses of Australia work together more effectively in service of evangelisation, social outreach and pastoral life?
 - How can the Church better support marriage and family life, presenting these vocations as a gift and supporting them practically in the generations to come?
 - How can we strengthen the collaboration among Catholic communities, agencies and welfare organisations in outreach to vulnerable and disadvantaged Australians?
-

IV. GOING FORTH: THE CHURCH AT THE SERVICE OF THE WORLD

*Give us ears to listen humbly to each other
and a discerning heart to hear what you are saying.*

RENEWING OUR COMMITMENT TO SERVICE IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

151. Australian Catholics look to the Plenary Council as an opportunity to renew and deepen the Church's mission of witnessing to the saving love of God, made visible in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and communicated through the Holy Spirit, through a ministry of service in Australian society. While there is already much to celebrate in the wide range of ministries and services the Catholic Church sponsors in various sectors of Australian life, the National Consultation calls for a new enthusiasm and creativity by all Catholics to develop "a conscious attitude of engaging positively with society".¹²⁰ For many Catholics, the claim of the Second Vatican Council that the Church must share the "joys and the hope, the griefs and anxieties" of all peoples continues to ring loudly.¹²¹

120 Plenary Council Thematic Discernment Papers, "'How is God calling us to be a Christ-Centred Church in Australia that is a Joyful, Hope-filled & Servant Community?'" accessed 21 October 2020, <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PC2020-thematic-papers-5.pdf>, 12.

121 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1.

152. However, much has changed since the 1960s in Australia and globally. Our country is often described as a secular country, but “we are a pluralist society composed of people who hold different religious beliefs, non-religious belief systems and worldviews”.¹²²
153. Today, although a majority of Australians identify as belonging to a Christian denomination, religious faith is often treated as a private concern and a specifically Christian perspective is a minority voice in public affairs. As an organisation within society, the Catholic Church’s interaction with the State has been characterised by both highly successful and productive partnerships and occasional points of tension and disagreement. The emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for effective relationships between the Church and public officials.
154. Tensions exist also among people of faith about how best to engage with the issues of society today. Church leaders must balance their ministry of governance and teaching within the faith community with the demands of representing the Church’s position in public settings. The Church’s engagement with society will call for “gifts that differ” (Rom 12:6) from engagement with Christian individuals and communities. The presence of the Holy Spirit assures us that through patient and courageous discernment Catholic communities can serve the genuine development of Australian society, by living out the *caritas* of God for people and for the earth, in the *veritas* the Gospel reveals to us.¹²³

Goals and Principles of Public Engagement

155. Since the Second Vatican Council, papal teaching has identified the goal of the Church’s service to society as the ‘integral human development of persons and of societies’ and the ‘responsible care for all creation’.¹²⁴ In a particular way, faced with the ongoing challenges of the global COVID-19 pandemic, Pope Francis has called all people to a new experience of human fraternity as brothers and sisters and of social friendship.¹²⁵ Discerning the signs of God’s coming kingdom in the light of the Gospel, Christians are guided in their response by the principles of Catholic Social Teaching.¹²⁶ Each Christian community must discern the particular needs and aspirations of their context and to

122 Plenary Council Thematic Discernment Papers, ““How is God calling us to be a Christ-Centred Church in Australia that is Missionary & Evangelising?”, accessed 21 October 2020, <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/PC2020-thematic-papers-1.pdf>, 7.

123 See Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Encyclical Letter (2009), n. 5.

124 See Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, Encyclical Letter (1967); John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*; Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*; Francis, *Laudato Si’*.

125 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, Encyclical Letter (2020), n. 5.

126 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 160-208.

build the relationships with other Christian, religious, civic and governmental groups to effectively foster the integral development of people, societies and the earth.

Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all.¹²⁷

156. The Cardijn method of social reflection in the light of the Gospel is well established in Church teaching and practice, and continues to offer a rich resource for Catholic communities in discerning concrete acts of engagement and service in society.¹²⁸ The reflective cycle of See, Judge and Act, developed from St Thomas Aquinas' teaching on the virtue of prudence,¹²⁹ has become a methodological paradigm for pastoral discernment at local and international levels, including the recent Synods of Bishops and regional Bishops' Conferences.¹³⁰

Mutual Enrichment through Receptive Learning

157. The Second Vatican Council signalled a shift in the *modus operandi* of the Church in its relationships with the wider world. It was a reorientation toward an openness and practical cooperation with others in a mutual dialogue aimed at the promotion of persons, of cultures and societies.¹³¹ The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* envisages a relationship of mutual learning and enrichment between the Church and society, since the heavenly and earthly cities, while distinct, are intimately wedded in this world.
158. There is, then, a type of "receptive learning"¹³² that can occur when Christians enter into mutually respectful and service-oriented relationships with those of other faiths, cultures and worldviews. Pope Francis has challenged the global Church to commit its efforts to fostering a culture of

127 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 8.

128 Plenary Council Thematic Discernment Papers, "'How is God calling us to be a Christ-Centred Church in Australia that is Humble, Healing & Merciful?'" accessed 21 October 2020, <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/PC2020-thematic-papers-4.pdf>, 17; Plenary Council Thematic Discernment Papers, "'How is God calling us to be a Christ-Centred Church in Australia that is Open to Conversion, Renewal & Reform?'" accessed 21 October 2020, <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/PC2020-thematic-papers-6.pdf>, 15.

129 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 547.

130 See Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, n. 4; Francis, *Laudato Si'*, n. 15; Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, "FABC at Forty Years: Responding to the Challenges of Asia – A New Evangelisation", accessed 21 October 2020, <http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/FABC%20Papers%20138%20final.pdf>.

131 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 40.

132 ARCIC III, *Walking Together On the Way* (London: SPCK, 2018), 10-11.

encounter, dialogue and fraternity on behalf of our shared humanity and shared earth. The Lord's command of love of neighbour extends also to those 'who think or act differently from us in social, political and even religious matters,' recognising that the Church can indeed "benefit from the opposition of its opponents and persecutors".¹³³

159. Catholic Education at all levels plays a key role in enabling an encounter of worldviews and perspectives in the shared quest for truth, wisdom and the common good.¹³⁴ At the same time, Catholic schools, colleges and universities witness to the faith encounter at the heart of the Catholic tradition, and propose to all people the intellectual, ethical and aesthetic commitments that arise from the Gospel and the tradition of the Church. Catholic higher education institutions can contribute to public discussion and policy development relating to issues of importance to the mission of the Church and to the integral development of people and society.¹³⁵

Collaboration for the Common Good

160. The National Consultation recognised the decisive contribution that Catholic education, health and welfare agencies continue to make to all Australians, and the strong public partnerships that Catholic service organisations have forged across the range of Australian jurisdictions and governments. Still, there is a call for greater efforts in collaboration between Church communities and agencies to "build a community of shared endeavour and a sense of shared service".¹³⁶
161. In this era of global networks of people and services, the National Consultation and Church documents call for greater efforts of collaboration with Christians of other denominations and with people of other religious communities to express stronger public witness to the benefits of dialogue, solidarity and fraternity in building a just and harmonious society. Ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and action contributes to stronger citizenship in a multicultural and multi-religious society, and lessens intolerance and religious misunderstandings both within religious communities and in the wider society. In a pluralised society, it is also the necessary means of "awakening religious awareness" in the public sphere and of witnessing to the common human values that transcend cultural and political differences.¹³⁷

133 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 28, 44.

134 Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love* (2013).

135 Francis, *Veritatis Gaudium*, Apostolic Constitution (2018).

136 Plenary Council Thematic Discernment Papers, "A Joyful, Hope-filled & Servant Community", 13.

137 Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, *Document on Human Fraternity*, Apostolic Voyages outside Italy (2019).

Ecumenical and interfaith relationships have been demonstrated and strengthened in recent years by encounters of faith sharing and friendship, cooperation in charitable works, and collaboration in areas of social policy, such as the protection of life, marriage, and religious freedom.

RENEWING OUR COMMITMENT TO PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL

A Church That Goes Forth to The Peripheries

God is the creator and source of all life and our cosmos is an expression of God's love for us. To participate in God's mission is to participate in the movement of God's love for people and for the planet, since God is the source of love.¹³⁸

162. The National Consultation expressed a deep desire within the Catholic community to share with all people and all creation the Good News of the God's love, enfleshed in Jesus Christ crucified and risen, and powerfully active through the Holy Spirit. This is the Church's treasure of great value (Matt 13:44), for which it gives everything that it has, everything that it is, to share this treasure with others.
163. Pope Francis has stressed that the task of evangelisation is to follow the Lord who leads us "from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the gospel".¹³⁹ On the eve of his election as Pope, Francis spoke of the Church's need for boldness (*parrhesia*) in coming out of its own space, summoning the Church "...to go to the peripheries, not only geographical, but also existential: those of the mystery of sin, of suffering, of injustice, those of ignorance and of the absence of faith, those of thought, those of every form of misery".¹⁴⁰
164. Australian Catholics are deeply aware of their own limitations and failings in witnessing to the kingdom of Christ in the world. The Gospel of God's saving love is a great treasure, yet "we hold this treasure in clay pots" (2 Cor 4:7). In many ways, the Church itself is deeply wounded and in need of the healing love of its Lord. We will only find this healing by going out to others.

The abuse crisis has changed us. The Church carries the scars of this terrible time in our story. We must find new ways of doing business—a way that holds

138 Plenary Council Thematic Discernment Papers, "Missionary & Evangelising", 9.

139 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 20.

140 Sandro Magister, "The Last Words of Bergoglio before the Conclave".

the wounded close to our hearts and bears our scars with dignity and hope for the future. God will not abandon us.¹⁴¹

Developing a Culture of Listening and Care

165. Central to this Gospel-inspired mission of healing and mercy is the commitment of the Church at all levels to developing ‘a culture of listening and dialogue’ among Church members and with those beyond the Church.¹⁴² As the risen Jesus listened attentively to the grieving disciples on the road to Emmaus before revealing himself more deeply to them “in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24: 13-32), so the Church must learn to listen more closely to the stories of people on their journey. Creating pastoral encounters with people and accompanying them as they reflect on their experiences and seek to respond to life’s challenges, is the way to a deeper encounter with the Lord’s presence and with the power of the Gospel.
166. Within the Catholic community, many voices call for this pastoral response of listening and dialogue.¹⁴³ Often, some lay Catholics feel unseen and unheard by Church leaders; some Catholic women have encountered patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes within the Church; some have experienced harassment or other abuses of power; some Catholics call for greater inclusion of people of minority sexual orientations or racial identities. Not infrequently, Catholics and their family members find themselves in an uneasy situation regarding particular Church teachings or disciplines, not because they identify any less as Catholic, and not because their attachment to Christ has grown “lukewarm” (Rev 3:16), but because of shifts in cultural norms and expectations that they once relied on to support their Catholic faith. Very often, however, this tension between people’s lived experience and the teachings of the Church reaches the point where people withdraw from parishes or communities, and no longer identify as Catholic.
167. This culture of listening and care must extend beyond the boundaries of the Church to the lives of all Australians, particularly those who are disadvantaged or at risk. In the new needs of today, in the context of the climate emergency and the ‘new normal’ created by the COVID-19 pandemic, a renewed commitment and strategy is needed to draw together the Church’s personnel and resources and to forge new partnerships of Catholics and others.

141 Plenary Council Thematic Discernment Papers, “Humble, Healing & Merciful”, 13.

142 Plenary Council Thematic Discernment Papers, “Humble, Healing & Merciful”, 16; “Missionary & Evangelising”, 19.

143 Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium*, n. 136-140; 168-174.

This could include cooperation across networks of parishes to work out how we can encounter and serve those needing our loving care, including those who are marginalised through mental and physical health, economic position, sexuality or exclusion.¹⁴⁴

Witnessing to the Gospel in a Change of Era

168. The deep and pervasive social changes of today's globalised world affect the Church in its structures and strategies, just as it affects Catholics in the way they live their faith in everyday life.

This epochal change has been set in motion by the enormous qualitative, quantitative, rapid and cumulative advances occurring in sciences and in technology, and by their instant application in different areas of nature and of life.¹⁴⁵

As a multicultural society, with an internationalised economy and work force and a highly technologized way of life, Australia is greatly exposed to these forces of change.

169. The gradual shift from a culturally Christian society to a more pluralistic and individualistic range of worldviews and faiths presents a real challenge to the mission of proclaiming the Gospel and the formation of Catholic communities and families. Inherited forms of faith transmission, well-suited to earlier cultural settings, lose their potency in different "soil" (Matt 13: 4-9). In particular, two new frontiers for Christian witness and dialogue open up in relation to the Church's relationship with people of other religion and with people of no religion.
170. In recent decades, the universal Church has focused anew on its engagement with other religious traditions in a globalised world, inspired by the example of Pope John Paul II in his gatherings with world religious leaders in Assisi. Though not without difficulties, dialogue with believers of other religious traditions can be facilitated by a common openness to the divine, regard for authoritative scriptures and traditions, and cultivation of the spiritual life. New possibilities for "fraternity and social friendship"¹⁴⁶ among religious people need to be explored in Australian society in order to foster a deeper dialogue of shared civic life, of shared action for justice and development, of theological exchange and of common spiritual awareness.¹⁴⁷

144 Plenary Council Thematic Discernment Papers, "A Joyful, Hope-filled & Servant Community", 12.

145 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 52.

146 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 135.

147 See Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991); Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue in Truth and Charity: Pastoral Orientations for Interreligious Dialogue* (2014); Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 271-286.

171. The significant increase in the number of Australians who identify with no religion, particularly among 15–24 and 25–34-year-olds, is concerning for many Catholics. Many of those now counted among the ‘nones’ on the national Census were baptised as infants and raised in Catholic households and schools. Some people with a non-religious identification report holding beliefs relating to a divine transcendence, to a benevolent presence in the universe, or to a personal afterlife; many hold to some spiritual practices and views. Some of the ‘nones’ hold that modern science provides the answer to life’s questions and has made religious faith redundant; a few are antagonistic towards all religions. While the Church’s outreach to non-religious people in recent decades has produced limited results, the Courtyard of the Gentiles events initiated by Pope Benedict XVI provides a model of respectful engagement with an eye to the common good.
172. The epochal change of today is energised by developing information and communication technologies and the increasing interpenetration of the physical, human and digital worlds. Both the immense benefits and the unpredictable dangers of the global digital culture have been highlighted in papal messages for World Communications Day, at the recent 2018 Synod on Youth, and by the Australian Catholic Bishops’ 2019-2020 Social Justice Statement, *Making It Real*.¹⁴⁸ Catholic communities and agencies are challenged to proclaim the Gospel within a digital culture, making discerning and humanising use of new forms of communication and interaction, while applying the ethical principles of Catholic Social Teaching to the digital world.
173. The global COVID-19 pandemic reveals and intensifies the complex features of globalisation. The ever-greater connectedness of the peoples of the world with each other, with non-human life and with the environment creates new and powerful opportunities for solidarity and interdependence; at the same time, it uncovers our shared vulnerability and increased exposure to biological, social and political risks.¹⁴⁹ Catholic communities in Australia have energetically responded to the challenges of liturgical and pastoral life in the midst of unusual health restrictions on public gathering and interaction. The human, social and economic impacts of the pandemic will be a significant factor shaping the Church’s mission in the years ahead. This is something for the Plenary Council to consider.

148 Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, “Making It Real: Genuine Human Encounter in our Digital World. Social Justice Statement 2019-2020”, accessed 21 October 2020, <https://socialjustice.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Social-Justice-Statement-2019-20.pdf>.

149 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 32-36.

Resourcing the Mission: Vocations, Charisms, Finances

174. To be effective, the Church's mission of evangelisation must be supported by human, physical and financial resources. The effects of destructive weather events, uncertainty in international markets and trade relations, and the impact of the pandemic on productivity and employment, will all leave their mark on the capacity of Australian dioceses, parishes and religious institutes to secure the resources for the ministries and programs they initiate and undertake in their mission. There is an awareness in the National Consultation that many of our current diocesan and parish structures are no longer financially or organisationally sustainable, and that considerable inequity exists among the resources available to Catholics in different parts of the country.¹⁵⁰
175. The National Consultation calls for "a spirit of financial cooperation" among the various Church authorities in order to move towards a "shared missionary endeavour", which is both suited to each local context and nationally coordinated.¹⁵¹ The Plenary Council offers a unique opportunity to foster collaboration among all the local Churches and Eparchies, Religious congregations, spiritual and liturgical traditions, cultural and multilingual expressions, contemplative and apostolic vocations that exist within the Catholic community in Australia, together with the extensive education, health and welfare agencies of the Church, and to call forth all the gifts and charisms given by the Holy Spirit for the Church's mission (1 Cor 12:7).

RENEWING OUR SOLIDARITY WITH FIRST AUSTRALIANS AND ALL THOSE ON THE MARGINS

176. Many forms of vulnerability and exclusion were named in the National Consultation. Pope Francis has called the Church to recommit itself to its mission in society, especially in the service of those 'at the margins': indigenous peoples, the abused, the unborn or disabled, the homeless and those with mental illness, the frail elderly and dying, refugees and the trafficked, newcomers and those at risk in the social and economic conditions of today. We recognise that the Church has not always 'been there' for such people. Yet the recognition of past failures and present needs should only reinforce our determination to serve and advocate on behalf of those at the margins.

150 Plenary Council Thematic Discernment Papers, "Missionary & Evangelising", 8; Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium*, n. 156-158.

151 Plenary Council Thematic Discernment Papers, "A Joyful, Hope-filled & Servant Community", 15.

First Australians

177. Many Australian Catholics continue to be challenged deeply by the words of Pope John Paul II to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during his 1986 visit to Alice Springs:

For thousands of years you have lived in this land and fashioned a culture that endures to this day. And during all this time, the Spirit of God has been with you. Many of you have been dispossessed of your traditional lands, and separated from your tribal ways, though some of you still have your traditional culture ... The discrimination caused by racism is a daily experience. You have learned how to survive, whether on your own lands, or scattered among the towns and cities. The Church invites you to express the living word of Jesus in ways that speak to your Aboriginal minds and heart ... You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.¹⁵²

178. Despite a range of successful initiatives with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by some dioceses, religious institutes and Church agencies, the Plenary Council may prioritise the question of how the Church can include and empower First Peoples to take their place more fully within Church and society.
179. Many Catholics realise that the integrity of both Church and society in Australia is intimately connected to the wellbeing and participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The is a great need for listening and dialogue between Aboriginal cultures and the various churches and religions in this country. We are challenged to:

... recognise the wisdom of Aboriginal people is needed for the health of our nation, that we can learn so much from Indigenous culture and knowledge. Church leaders must call forth this wisdom and create spaces for it to be heard.¹⁵³

Following a nation-wide consultation, the First Nations National Constitutional Convention at Uluru in May 2017 issued an agreed *Statement from the Heart*, which called for “the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution”, and for a Makarrata

152 John Paul II, “Address to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples” (speech, Blatherskite Park, Alice Springs, Australia, 29 November 1986), n. 2, 6, 12.

153 “How is God calling us to be a Christ-centred Church in Australia that is: Humble, Healing & Merciful?” 16; See also “How is God calling us to be a Christ-centred Church in Australia that is: Missionary & Evangelising?”, 17-18.

Commission that would undertake “a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history”.¹⁵⁴ Aboriginal Australians, including Catholics, have invited all Australians to consider these matters.¹⁵⁵ The Plenary Council is an opportunity for the Catholic Church in Australia to make a public response to the *Statement from the Heart* and increase opportunities for collaboration with local Indigenous communities around the country.

Abuse victims and survivors

180. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse shone a light upon child abuse in church and civic institutions, underlining the widespread and systemic nature of this social evil. While recognising that much has been done to address past failures by the Church in this area, the National Consultation calls for even greater efforts to learn from and care for survivors of abuse, and to strengthen the Church's role as a champion for the safety of children, young people, and more vulnerable adults in society.
181. To ensure the required commitment and vigilance, the Plenary Council may take steps to foster a "culture of appraisal and review" at all levels and in all parts of the Church.¹⁵⁶ Significant steps in this direction have been taken by Church authorities, in the development of safeguarding standards against which practice can be audited and reported. The Plenary Council is an opportunity to celebrate and enhance examples of 'good practice' in creating a culture of safety, responsibility and accountability in Catholic communities, while avoiding any denial or complacency in this area.

The unborn, disabled, elderly and dying

182. Because of its vision of the human person and society, the Church upholds the moral prohibition on the direct taking of innocent life. In contemporary Australia, the two groups most at risk in this regard are the unborn child and the sick, elderly and dying. The situation is serious. In many jurisdictions, abortion is now generally permitted right up to birth. Some health professionals feel coerced into participating in these procedures against their conscience. There are threats to the unborn not only in direct abortion but also in some medical research, genetic screening

154 Uluru Statement from the Heart, “Makarrata means ‘coming together after a struggle’”, accessed 21 October 2020, <https://ulurustatement.org/>.

155 The National Aboriginal and Torres strait Islander Catholic Council, “2017 NATSICC Response to the Uluru Statement from the Heart”, accessed 19 Jan 2021, https://www.natsicc.org.au/assets/final_draft_uluru_statement.pdf.

156 Plenary Council Thematic Discernment Papers, “Humble, Healing & Merciful”, 17.

and reproductive technology programmes. Also, at risk in this environment, are the unborn and newborn who are disabled and who can, by having the opportunities and resources available to them limited, be denied the right to realise their full potential and live without the burden of discrimination against them. The Catholic community must be a voice for these voiceless groups, and by its communities of care and social services ensure that those living with disabilities, along with women and babies, are supported in every way.

183. In the light of the growing public acceptance of euthanasia, the National Consultation and many leaders of churches and other faith traditions call for a new and persuasive witness to the inherent dignity of every human person, including those approaching the end of life, or who are suffering or feel their life lacks purpose.

The Church in Australia, already committed to serve the elderly, sick and dying through its hospitals, aged care and hospice services, and to advocate for the continued protection of every human life at law and for the greater relief of suffering through accessible palliative care, will continue to evaluate its engagement with these fundamental issues. Equally, it will continue to embrace the challenge of evangelising the culture and the heart regarding a Christian understanding of the preciousness of human life, of the dignity of the elderly, sick and dying, and of genuine compassion and respect.

The homeless and those with mental illness

184. The National Consultation and recent Church documents—including annual social justice statements—have identified other vulnerable groups such as the homeless and those suffering mental illness. In each case we acknowledge failures of reverence and support in our community.

The Plenary Council may commit the Church in Australia to working with governments, professionals and the community as far as possible to eliminate street-sleeping and other forms of homelessness, to contribute to the nation's stock of affordable housing, and to increasing the resources devoted to mental health in this country.

Refugees, the trafficked, newcomers and others at risk

185. In many statements in recent years the Catholic Church in Australia has expressed its unease and even shame regarding government policies that treat asylum seekers as criminals or cultural prejudices that portray them as invaders. The National Consultation calls the Church to speak for

this voiceless group also, as it must for those modern slaves and trafficked persons of which many have only recently become aware. Australia has been blessed by waves of people coming from all corners of the globe and has offered them a safe haven from war and persecution and opportunity in place of poverty and exploitation. The Church has often been a lone voice in speaking up for these newcomers or would-be newcomers and will continue to advocate on their behalf in the future. We will also offer them the support they need to feel at home amongst us, through our parishes, schools and social welfare services.

The Church today must always be on the lookout for those who are marginalised or excluded from the human community and whose dignity—and even their very life—is thereby endangered. The Plenary Council may rededicate the Church in Australia to the service of all of those described by Jesus as "the least of these my sisters and brothers" (Matt 25:3 1-46).

RENEWING OUR SOLIDARITY WITH ALL LIFE AND WITH THE EARTH

Care for "Our Common Home"¹⁵⁷

186. The National Consultation has called for stronger efforts by Catholics and all Australians to care for the natural environment of the earth and all its forms of life.¹⁵⁸ Many Catholics draw inspiration from Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*, which underscores the interdependence of all forms of existence in God's gift of creation and the responsibility of humanity as stewards and custodians of our "sister earth".¹⁵⁹ The growing awareness of our ecological responsibility is one of the clearest signs of the times and has become a constitutive dimension of the Church's preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. As the Australian Bishops have stated:

The Church hears the cries of the poor and the groans of the earth. It seeks to stand in solidarity with the poor and the marginalised, and to exercise good stewardship of the fragile ecosystems that support life on earth. Every day more Christians are becoming aware of their responsibilities as people of faith towards God's Creation.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, n. 1.

¹⁵⁸ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium*, n. 112-113; "Missionary & Evangelising?", 14; "Open to Conversion, Renewal & Reform?", 12-13, 16.

¹⁵⁹ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, n. 1, 51.

¹⁶⁰ Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, "A New Earth: The Environmental Challenge. Social Justice Statement 2002", accessed 21 October 2020, <https://socialjustice.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Social-Justice-Statement-2002.pdf>, 10.

187. Australia is surrounded by the nations of South East Asia and Oceania. Pope John Paul II speaks about the need to safeguard the extraordinary natural habitats of these regions.

The natural resources of Oceania need to be protected against the harmful policies of some industrialized nations and increasingly powerful transnational corporations which can lead to deforestation, despoliation of the land, pollution of rivers by mining, over-fishing of profitable species, or fouling the fishing grounds with industrial and nuclear waste.¹⁶¹

188. The Church in Australia stands in solidarity with those smaller nations of Oceania which are particularly exposed to the destructive impacts of global climate change. Meeting in Port Moresby in 2018, the Catholic Bishops of Oceania warned:

Every day our people are suffering from the negative—indeed sometimes disastrous—effects of global warming. These include rising sea levels, rising ocean temperatures, acidification of waters and coral bleaching, and threats to biodiversity alongside the more widely noticed increasing extreme weather patterns of cyclones, typhoons and storms.¹⁶²

An Integral Ecology of Life

189. Arising from a Christian understanding of the creation and of the human person, *Laudato Si'* outlines an “integral ecology” of life which recognises the interconnectedness of all living things in environmental, social and economic systems, diverse cultural expressions and traditions, the “ecology” of the private and public domains, the requirements of the common good, and the inter-generational requirements of justice.¹⁶³
190. The Church’s distinctive contribution to fostering this integral ecology arises from the “Gospel of life” it has received from the Lord Jesus, and from the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in the world.¹⁶⁴ Thus, an essential element of the Church’s mission in Australia is to communicate the Gospel of life in its fullness, especially where threats to life emerge. On the thirtieth anniversary of Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes*, Pope John Paul II recalled its words:

161 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Oceania*, n. 31.

162 Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania, “Care for our Common Home of Oceania: A Sea of Possibilities”, accessed 21 October 2020, <https://www.caritas.org.au/docs/default-source/oceania/fcbco-statement-april-2018.pdf>.

163 Francis, *Laudato Si'*, n. 137-162.

164 John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, Encyclical Letter (1995), n. 3.

Whatever is opposed to life itself; murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or wilful self-destruction; whatever violates the integrity of the human person; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the trafficking of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, all these poison human society and dishonour the Creator.¹⁶⁵

191. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the Church in Australia is called to renew its service to society by both promoting and modelling this commitment to an integral ecology based on the Gospel of life. This will be reflected in relationships of solidarity and care for life in all its dimensions, both human and non-human. It will witness to the origin and destiny of all life forms in the mystery of divine life. “Conversion to an integral ecology of life calls for a spirituality of gratitude and wonder, giving praise to the Creator and Giver of all that exists”.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 29, cited in John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, n. 3.

¹⁶⁶ Plenary Council Thematic Discernment Papers, “Open to Conversion, Renewal & Reform”, 13.

JOURNEYING TOGETHER IN DISCERNMENT

Renewing our commitment to service in Australian society

- How can the Church become a sign and instrument of the ‘ecological conversion’ called for by the teaching of recent Popes and by the *sensus fidei* of Catholics around the world?
- How can the Church express and promote a commitment to an ‘integral ecology of life’ in all its dimensions, with particular attention the more vulnerable people and environments in our country and region?
- What can we do to express respectful and cooperative attitudes with others in Australian society, focusing on opportunities to witness to God’s grace at work in the world?

Renewing our commitment to proclaiming the gospel

- How can the Church deepen the identity of all the baptised as missionary disciples, sharing in the mission of Jesus to prepare the way of God’s kingdom?
- What can the Church do to address the question of sustainability of current Church structures and strategies in the light of the call to a greater ‘shared missionary endeavour’?
- How can the Church be faithful to its evangelising mission in contemporary Australian culture, especially where teachings conflict with cultural values and practices?
- How can we proclaim the Gospel as taught by the Catholic Church in today’s Australian society?

Renewing our solidarity with First Australians and all those at the margins

- How can we contribute to the greater legal and moral recognition and participation of Indigenous Australians in the life of the nation and the Church?
- How can the Church embrace an Aboriginal way of being Christian in spirituality, theology, liturgy and discipleship?
- How can the Church promote an ‘integral ecology of life’ in the face of risks to life, to human dignity, and to the environment?

V. I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS

*Lead your Church into a hope-filled future, that we may live the joy of the Gospel.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, bread for the journey from age to age. Amen.*

*Our Lady, Help of Christians, pray for us.
St Mary MacKillop, pray for us.*

ST MARY MACKILLOP, MODEL OF AUSTRALIAN DISCIPLESHIP

192. On 17 October 2010, Mary MacKillop, co-founder of the Sisters of Saint Joseph, was canonised by Pope Benedict XVI in the square of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. Her story, and her legacy, are a powerful reminder that the way of courageous discipleship of Jesus Christ is not foreign to those who live under the Australian sun in this wide brown land. Both before, and especially since, her canonisation, the words of St Mary of the Cross have struck a chord in the hearts of many Australians, and certainly in the hearts of most Catholics in this country. "Never see a need" she encouraged her sisters, "without doing something about it".¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ "Our Foundress Mary MacKillop", Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart, accessed 28 October 2020, <https://www.sosj.org.au/our-foundress-mary-mackillop/legacy/introduction/>.

193. The fifth Plenary Council in Australia, convened to discern what God is asking of us in Australia at this time, is a unique opportunity to embrace more fully this practical spirituality of St Mary MacKillop. Throughout the pages of this *Instrumentum Laboris*, and through the various stages of consultation and discernment, the whole Catholic community in Australia, in an exercise in synodality, has sought to identify the needs to which the Church today is called to respond. As has been mentioned throughout this document, it is the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties, of the people of our age, and of our country, which are the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.¹⁶⁸ As people of faith we believe that, through the gift of his Church, the Lord has equipped us, and continues to equip us, to recognise the needs of our time and set ourselves to doing something about them.
194. In the prayer composed for the Year of Grace we speak of Mary MacKillop as one “who showed us new ways of living the Gospel”.¹⁶⁹ This present *Instrumentum Laboris* is an invitation to follow in Saint Mary’s footsteps, seeking new ways to share the joy of the Gospel, with each other and with the communities in which we live.
195. Central to Mary’s spirituality was her absolute commitment to “the will of our good God”.¹⁷⁰ It is also central to the work of the Plenary Council: we are seeking to discover, together, what God is asking of us at this time, trusting in the Providence that never fails.

FROM CHALLENGE TO OPPORTUNITY

196. Within the pages of this *Instrumentum Laboris* many challenges and difficulties faced by the Church in Australia are discussed. These challenges are, at the same time, real opportunities for the Church. We ask ourselves today, as did those who listened to Peter speak in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, “What should we do?” (Acts 2:37). As Pope John Paul II reminds us in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, “we put the question with trusting optimism, but without underestimating the problems we face”.¹⁷¹ The Pope goes on to remind us that ultimately, we put our trust not in formulas, but in Jesus himself who assures us that he is always with us.¹⁷²

168 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 4.

169 Monica Cavanaugh, “A Woman of Grace – St Mary of the Cross MacKillop”, Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart, accessed 28 October 2020, <https://www.sosj.org.au/a-woman-of-grace-st-mary-of-the-cross-mackillop/>.

170 St Mary MacKillop, “Beyond the Years \of Grace”, Year of Grace, accessed 4 November 2020, <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20130409214338/http://www.yearofgrace.catholic.org.au/index.php/resources/st-mary-mackillop>.

171 John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 29.

172 John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 29.

197. It is this assurance that should encourage us and empower us to speak and act with that *parrhesia*, that boldness and courage, which are a gift of the Holy Spirit: We need the Spirit's prompting, lest we be paralyzed by fear and excessive caution, lest we grow used to keeping within safe bounds. Let us remember that closed spaces grow musty and unhealthy. When the Apostles were tempted to let themselves be crippled by danger and threats, they joined in prayer to implore *parrhesía*: "And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness" (Acts 4:29). As a result, "when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31).¹⁷³
198. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit at work in us, as individuals and as the community of disciples which we call the Church, which can guide us as we step bravely into the future, always in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd who is our Way, our Truth and our Life. This is what we have been praying for since our journey towards the Plenary Council began: "Come Holy Spirit of Pentecost, come Holy Spirit of the great South Land, bless and unite all your people in Australia".¹⁷⁴
199. This same prayer concludes asking for the prayers of St Mary MacKillop and of Our Lady, the Help of Christians. It is to Mary, the mother of the Lord, to whom we confidently turn, asking for her prayerful support and presence with us in the journey which stretches out before us.

MARY MOTHER OF THE CHURCH AND HELP OF CHRISTIANS

200. The will of God, which was so central to the life of St Mary MacKillop, was also central to the life of the woman whose name Mary MacKillop bears: Mary, the Mother of the Lord. It is in John's gospel that we find Mary spelling out for the stewards at the wedding feast in Cana what was at the heart of her own life: "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). Mary, the Mother of the Church, would say the same to us.
201. Under the title, Help of Christians, Mary has been Australia's patroness since 1844. In May 2020, the bishops entrusted our country to her care, seeking her intercession for the safety of all our people especially in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the Scriptures remind us, the Church cannot be complete without the presence of this woman who stood at the foot of the cross (John 19:25-27) and who joined the apostles and the first Christian community in continuous prayer as they awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:12-14).

¹⁷³ Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, n. 133.

¹⁷⁴ Plenary Council, "Plenary Council Prayer", accessed 22 October 2020, <http://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Plenary-Council-Prayer-Card-Print-at-Home.pdf>.

202. Mary's inspiration and guidance, present from the very beginnings of the early Church, are needed today as we endeavour to build a Christ-centred Church in a modern world. As a young woman, she displayed great courage. She stood firm in her trust in God, and in her courageous "yes" despite being unsure of what that "yes" would mean. At a time of much uncertainty and although "greatly troubled", she was able, because of the angel's assurance that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High God will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35), to put God first in her life —above all things: "here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).
203. Mary bore her sufferings with great strength and an unwavering faith in the goodness, mercy and compassion of God. While she did not have a great understanding of all events, or of how God was working in and through her, she treasured these experiences and pondered them in her heart seeking to comprehend their meaning (Luke 2:19, 51). Through her prayer for us we can confidently hope that we, too, will be able to seek God's grace in our lives. May her example awaken in us a desire to follow Christ and to be touched by his love. And when our paths are clouded by fear, anxiety or confusion, may Mary's *fiat* be a source of strength for us as we strive to accept God's will in our lives.
204. Mary's path, as the gospels show us, was always to lead through service and to point the way to Jesus. Her care and concern for others is a feature of the gospel portrait of Mary. She hastened to the side of Elizabeth, putting her cousin's needs above her own (Luke 1:39). At the wedding at Cana, despite being one of the guests, she listened to the troubles of the servants, leading them to the one person she knew would help them: "Do whatever He tells you" (John 2:5). Mary's humility, her quiet yet thoughtful guidance and her faithful endurance are qualities we can learn to imitate; they are hallmarks of faithful discipleship.
205. In the present context of the Church in Australia, Mary's steadfastness at the foot of the cross is especially significant. As she did with Jesus, so are we called to stand in solidarity and compassion with each other, particularly the wounded, the poor and the traumatised. We, too, are called to be witnesses to the suffering of Jesus relived in the many survivors of sexual abuse, in the pain of our First Nations peoples and in the lives of all who suffer.
206. From the cross, Jesus, in entrusting Mary to the beloved disciple, gave her to us as the Mother of the Church (John 19:27). United now with her son in the kingdom of heaven, Mary is close to us in our joys and sorrows. She prays for us 'now', that we might follow her son with courage and fidelity, and she prays for us 'at the hour of our death', that we might be united with her son in the joy of heaven.

207. May Mary, the Mother of the Church and Help of Christians, accompany us with her prayers and her presence as we continue on our journey towards the Plenary Council, seeking always to “do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5).

And so, we pray:

Come, Holy Spirit of Pentecost.
 Come, Holy Spirit of the great South Land.
 O God, bless and unite all your people in Australia
 and guide us on the pilgrim way of the
 Plenary Council.
 Give us the grace to see your face in one another and
 to recognise Jesus, our companion on the road.
 Give us the courage to tell our stories and to speak
 boldly of your truth.
 Give us ears to listen humbly to each other and a
 discerning heart to hear what you are saying.
 Lead your Church into a hope-filled future, that we
 may live the joy of the Gospel.
 Through Jesus Christ our Lord, bread for the journey
 from age to age.

Amen.

Our Lady Help of Christians, pray for us.
 St Mary MacKillop, pray for us.

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